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The central task of *Toward a Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness: Cultivating Students as Agents of Social Change* is discovering pedagogical and theological wisdom for social transformation, through a dialogue with James H. Cone and Paulo Freire. Accordingly, it uncovers a deep concern with liberation, as a theological thrust countering oppressive ideologies, through curiosity, awareness, reflection, and response. I uncover this concern for liberation from dominant, oppressive ideologies by analyzing *God of the Oppressed* by James H. Cone and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. I do so by utilizing critical hermeneutics, historical criticism, and critical exegesis. By way of their seminal works, *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I engage these theorists in an imaginative dialogue so as to lay a foundation *Toward a Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness*. As I perceive it, liberation may manifest within various aspects of pedagogical and theological activity – among them are rereading history, critical inquiry, lived experience, resistance to oppression, and scriptural interpretation. Therefore, cultivating a critical liberative theological consciousness is a process of disentangling theological and social formations that are destructive, constructing new/different ways of being in relations and transforming interpretive lenses that create hierarchies of humanity (and all of creation). I situate this study within a theological classroom, in an academic setting.

TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL LIBERATIVE THEOLOGICAL
CONSCIOUSNESS: CULTIVATING STUDENTS AS
AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

by

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For my ancestors (faithful guardians), my mother (a master educator), my father (a true friend), my aunt (a wise physician), and my wife, who loves, supports, inspires, and challenges me amid the process of being/becoming.

APPROVAL PAGE

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In Hebrews 12, a biblical, new testament text, the author writes, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a *great cloud of witnesses*, let us throw off everything that hinders...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us...” I feel these words deeply as I come to the end of a lengthy, demanding educational journey. As I read, reflected, wrote, and theorized my way through this journey, “I do not journey alone” became my mantra. The *great cloud of witnesses* has been and is with me, even now, and I owe them profound gratitude.

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CHAPTER I

IN SEARCH OF A CRITICAL LIBERATIVE THEOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND THE PROCESS OF LIBERATION

To surmount the situation of oppression, men must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire, 1970/2003, pp. 31–32)

While we must begin our theological reflection with the particularity of our own struggle for justice, we should never stop there. The truth of our particular struggle pushes us beyond ourselves to the truth of other struggles...Human beings are made for each other and no people can realize their full humanity except as they participate in its realization for others. (Cone, 1975/1997, pp. xii–xiii)

Introduction

On Social and Theological Transformation

We live in the tension between oppression and freedom. It is present in our history and our daily lives. The United States was founded on texts of freedom. However, while they were being written, communities of Black and Brown people were being oppressed. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), one of the central “Founding Fathers of the United States” and principal author of the *Declaration of Independence*, is a key example of this tension. Jefferson and other colonists felt they were oppressed by the British Parliament and King George III because their voices were being silenced (Johnson, 1997). He opposed Great Britain, which he considered tyrannical because of its mistreatment of the 13 colonies, but he was not free of his oppressive exploits.

History teaches that Jefferson disregarded the freedom of many people while struggling for the freedom of White, male, Christian, elite landowners like himself. He and other founders gained their affluence on the enslavement and silencing of Africans. Jefferson and others of European descent forced Africans, Mexicans, and Native Americans to conform to their cultural, political, theological, and social perspectives. Furthermore, Jefferson thought education was the best way to institute this conformity (Spring, 2011).

The thought of utilizing education as an instrument to institute dominance did not originate with Jefferson. Leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony used educational and legal policies to strip the *unalienable rights* of native peoples. The Puritans, a religious group seeking freedom from the oppression of King Charles I, founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They arrived on the shores of the Algonquian Nation in the 1620s. Joel Spring (2011), critical historian and author of *The American School*, writes,

Attitudes of cultural and racial superiority underpinned plans for the religious and cultural conversion of Native Americans. English colonists brought with them, from Europe, a sense of righteousness about their Protestant beliefs and the superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture. Colonists branded Native Americans as ‘heathen savages.’ (p. 25)

The English sought to convert the “Indian” on all fronts. They thought it necessary to establish a system that would maintain their cultural identity and, in the process, strip non-Anglo-Saxon natives of their cultural identities. Massachusetts passed laws in 1642 and 1647 that required “masters,” “parents,” and “communities to establish and support schools” (Spring, 2011, p. 17), believing that children should be taught to read in order to follow the commands of the Bible and the laws of the colony. In 1646,

the Massachusetts General Court declared that native peoples would be put to death if they denied the “true God, or his creation or government of the world” (Spring, 2011, p. 28).

The Puritans read the *Bible* as a liberating text for *their* oppression while they used it to oppress people of the Algonquian Nation. The Puritans and Thomas Jefferson were Protestant Christians. Paradoxically, Christianity is founded on the teachings of a first century Palestinian-Jew by the name of Jesus. The Gospels, the central texts through which the liberatory actions and teachings of Jesus are narrated, were written by Jewish individuals whose homeland (i.e., Palestine) was an *occupied territory* of the Roman Empire.

I am arrested by the idea that one group of people would claim their freedom while simultaneously oppressing another group of people. On the one hand, the *Declaration of Independence* was not written with Indigenous, African, and Mexican communities in mind. On the other hand, abolitionists, former slaves, and free African/Americans re-interpreted the *Declaration of Independence*. They read it as a text articulating democracy and freedom *for all*.

The tension between the lived experience of oppression and the promise of freedom is a struggle that shapes our history, past and present. In 2019, with a government entity like the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and a social movement like Black Lives Matter (BLM), it is clear the United States lives in the tension between oppression and freedom. Education, whether for good or ill, has been and *is* an avenue for teaching individuals to navigate this tension. Because U.S. history is

shaped by political, religious, and social systems of oppression, I believe educating citizens to critically engage their local, national, and global communities is vital for democracy. I perceive critical education and the classroom as avenues for cultivating student-citizens. I envision theoretical and practical approaches to engage students in a process of learning to think and act *freely* as responsible members of our society.

As a researcher, influenced by the interdisciplinary work of Cultural Studies, in the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, I am bridging two schools of thought: (a) critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education/social movement founded on the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and (b) Black liberation theology, a theological perspective/social movement founded on the theology of James H. Cone. I argue that it is impossible to disentangle theological and social transformation in the United States. Therefore, linking critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology is one way of addressing human suffering caused by systems of oppression, both theological and social.

In this project, I explore the ways critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology, by way of Paulo Freire and James H. Cone, foster students' abilities to critically engage the world. Pairing these disciplines, I study, reflect, and write with the hope that students will grow in their critical consciousness, learn to identify injustice, and envisage ways to change systems of inequality through an educative process that tends toward emancipation. I conceptualize the enacting of this practice of education for liberation in a theological classroom. I lay the foundation for a theoretical framework that centers critical agency, critical thinking, and critical response as educative goals in the process of

liberation. My research questions light the way *Toward a Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness*. They are:

1. What wisdom might theological education, in an academic setting, gain from a dialogue between critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology?
2. How might a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness, as a theoretical framework, take shape in light of the dialogue?

Ultimately, the concepts which anchor this research project are teaching students to become *aware* of systematic and systemic oppression, *reflect* on their individual and collective roles and responsibilities within these systems, and *respond* to systemic and systematic oppression through public engagement.

The Impact of Story/telling on Teaching, Learning, and Research

In the African American community, storytelling is a key component of connecting the lives of individuals to the world in which they live (Cone, 1975/1997; Floyd-Thomas, 2006; Hill-Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). Through storytelling, communal as well as individual experiences, history, sociality, acts of resistance, and wisdom are passed down from one generation to the next generation. As a practice, storytelling invites individuals to voice who they are, how they came to understand themselves, who they are in relationship to others, who they are in relationship to the community-at-large, and how they understand the social world (Riessman, 1993; Schwalbe, 2008).

Storytelling invites listeners to experience the intersections between individual, communal, and societal matters. Equally, storytelling invites listeners to connect the proverbial dots between historical and present realities, power and oppression, and

possibilities for critical change. As I theorize it, this dissertation is one story amidst innumerable stories striving against social injustice, advancing critical hope, and envisioning liberative educational gateways.

My story and the story of my ancestors is an example of the intersections between individual, communal, and societal matters. My ancestors were enslaved Africans, free African/Americans, Native Americans (i.e., Tuscarora), and slaveholding Europeans in Bertie County, Windsor, North Carolina. In other words, my story is shaped by the history of European colonization. As a child, I heard stories of my African, African American, and Native American ancestors' resistance to, subversion of, and survival from oppression. I also heard stories of these same ancestors being abused, beaten, and dehumanized by my European ancestors. My knowledge, emotions, and images regarding these stories, stories interconnected with the story of the United States, are driving forces for my beliefs and actions concerning liberation. Whether I am teaching in the classroom or ministering in the church, liberation is at the core of my pedagogy and theology. I believe, as James H. Cone (1975/1997) described, "Liberation is none other than the overthrow of everything that is against the fulfillment of humanity" (p. 71). I believe storytelling is one way to bring about the fulfillment of humanity. Shaped by Christian stories of Jesus and his liberative teachings, I am a person of faith, like Cone and Freire, believing that the practice of education for liberation is an act of hopeful resistance which centers the lives of the oppressed (Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003). By centering the experiences of the oppressed, storytelling has the power to challenge and encourage listeners to struggle against systems of injustice.

In tangible and intangible ways, stories shape cultural, theological, and social realities. The power of story/telling is that stories can be constructive and destructive, encouraging and discouraging, empowering and disempowering. The *familiar* story of Christopher Columbus is a prime example. Listeners are told that Columbus discovered the “new world;” he spread his Christian beliefs through missionizing and proved that the world was not flat. He brought a sense of order and decency to the disorderly, unholy, ways of the “savages” and their “heathen culture.” With his voyages, a new era of Christianity and European prowess was ushered in.

The story of Christopher Columbus could be perceived as an empowering story because it imparts a sense of accomplishment, pride, and privilege. Without Columbus, the “new world” might not have been discovered, Christianity might not have become the largest religion in the world, and people might not have learned that the world is round. The story of Christopher Columbus, his voyage, and his three ships (i.e., Nina, Pinta, Santa Maria) has been printed in countless history books. It has been taught to children in rhyme, “In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” He is celebrated with a holiday and time has been constructed (i.e., pre-Columbian, post-Columbian) around his discovery of the “new world.” However, the *familiar* story of Columbus is debatable and troublesome.

First, the story sanitizes the destructiveness of his mission. It does not detail the deaths of millions of Indigenous people, the stealing of Native lands, the enslavement of Africans as commodities, and European colonization as an act of terror (Loewen, 1995; Spring, 2011). For people of European descent, “The Father of the New World” is

considered a hero, an American hero. For people of Native and African descent, Columbus was a death dealer whose actions helped shape 400+ years of European subjugation in the modern-day Americas (i.e., North, South). Second, it suggests that sailors had not traveled to and from the “new world” before Columbus’s discovery. Archeologists have unearthed African, Phoenician, Viking, and Scandinavian artifacts which demonstrate that voyagers had been traveling to the Americas as early as 800 B.C. (Loewen, 1995). Third, it perpetuates lies. Columbus did not sail to North America nor to what is now the United States. Loewen (1995), a sociologist and author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong*, writes,

Washington Irving wins credit for popularizing the flat-earth fable in 1828. In his bestselling biography of Columbus, Irving described Columbus’s supposed defence of his round-earth theory before the flat-earth savants at Salamanca University. Irving himself surely knew the story to be fiction. He probably thought it added a nice dramatic flourish and would do no harm. But it does. It invites us to believe that the “primitives” of the world, admittedly including pre-Columbian Europeans, had only a crude understanding of the planet they lived on, until aided by a forward-thinking European. (p. 46)

The story of Christopher Columbus has shaped the past and it continues to shape the present. It is one of countless stories that perpetuates the notion of European domination and the marginalization of Indigenous, Black, and Brown people in the Americas.

Storytelling is a way of inviting listeners—and readers—to imagine the possibilities for human liberation and divine interaction (Bible; Ehrman, 2008; Long, 2005; Rohr, 2013) within the African American cultural, historical, and religious tradition. The Exodus narrative of Moses leading the “children of Israel” out of Egyptian bondage (i.e., slavery) is one example. The story is so engrained in the African American

tradition that Harriet Tubman, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, was nicknamed “Moses” because she led enslaved persons out of American bondage. She believed the struggle to liberate her people was a divine calling and a communal responsibility. Black people have told and continue telling the story of Harriet Tubman to conjure yearnings for justice and freedom in an oppressive society. The Exodus narrative and the story of Harriet Tubman are stories which shaped Black liberation theology in the United States (Cone, 1975/1997).

For Christians, parables are stories filled with complexity, nuance, and comparisons that encourage listeners as well as readers to imagine multiple possibilities for understanding individual, communal, and social worlds (Bible; Cone, 1975/1997; Ehrman, 2008; McKim, 1996; Rohr, 2013). The telling of parables, as a teaching method, has been practiced for hundreds of years in the Christian tradition. The central texts for reading parables are the Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Jesus of Nazareth, a rabbi (*translated* - teacher) and the central figure of the Gospels, taught in parables. Yet, the use of parables is not limited to the Gospels and Christianity. Parables are used by religious and non-religious traditions alike (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) because they encompass the common, familiar, everyday experiences of individuals/communities to teach multiple lessons (Ehrman, 2008; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). I emphasize the Gospels because the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and the theology of James H. Cone are grounded in the parables of Jesus.

Paulo Freire, a Roman Catholic shaped by the Roman Catholic Leftist Movement, and James H. Cone, a Protestant (i.e., African Methodist Episcopal) shaped by the Civil

Rights and Black Power Movements, claimed their social action as extensions of Jesus' teachings (Burrow, 1993; Leopando, 2017). Central to their work is the idea that faith is not confined to individual piety. Faith is a communal act rooted in the liberation of marginalized people. Acts and teachings of liberation are counter to the colonizing power dynamics (e.g., classism, racism, sexism) firmly rooted in Christianity. For Cone, Freire, and myself, the actions and teachings of Christianity *should* be congruent with the liberatory teachings and actions of Jesus. We believe that faith, pedagogy, and theology should wrestle with and respond to the silenced stories of the oppressed. Thus, I join the tradition of African American and Christian storytelling (Canon, 2006; Riessman, 1993; Wilmore, 1989) by bringing together Black liberation theology and critical pedagogy as a way of imagining the possibilities for individual, communal, and societal change.

I move to share an experience of teaching a graduate level course in a Master of Christian Education degree program. The experience is the lodestone for this research project. I tell the story to link my teaching and learning past with my research present. It is intended to disclose and envisage gateways for educational undertakings in theological classrooms. I share this educational story and subsequent stories as a way of inviting students, critical pedagogues, and religious educators to engage, question, and imagine new possibilities for critical liberative theological consciousness/education.

In the Spring of 2013, I had the occasion to teach "Introduction to Ethics," an accelerated course at a small college in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The institution was a private, Christian college known for its conservative theological perspective. I was invited to teach the course because a colleague thought I would challenge the students

without dismantling their theological worldviews. The class consisted of 12 adult learners. Many of the students were ministers or laypersons within their churches. I entered the classroom as an ordained Baptist minister with a Master of Divinity degree from Wake Forest University School of Divinity; a private, graduate-professional school known for its liberal theological perspective.

The course was designed to address the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of a Christian minister, discuss the philosophy of ethics and the application of ethics, give attention to subjects in counseling, finance, and law, and expose students to an ethical immersion experience. The goals of the course, as articulated in the syllabus, were to: (a) analyze solid positions concerning ethical issues, (b) develop an understanding of diverse ethical views, (c) evaluate how one's theology influences ethical decisions, and (d) integrate resources for withstanding the ethical challenges of ministry. Students were assigned group presentations, short essays, and reflection papers as mediums for questioning, understanding, and applying theological ethics. The required textbooks were *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* by Stanley Hauerwas, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* by H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* by Scott B. Rae, and *African-American Pastoral Care and Counseling: The Politics of Oppression and Empowerment* by Edward P. Wimberly. Of the required textbooks, *Moral Choices*, written by a conservative Christian ethicist, was assigned by the college. The additional texts were textbooks I read as a graduate student at Wake Forest University.

The first assignment, a short essay, required students to consider various ways to read and interpret the Bible as a text conveying the commands of God (i.e., ethical codes). With the Bible as primary text, students were asked to engage the first few chapters of *Moral Choices* as they developed their ideas. Author of *Moral Choices*, Scott B. Rae (2009), argues a direct correlation between the commands of God and moral agency. One student chose only to reference the Bible. In responding to the prompt, the student asked several questions: (a) Why be moral? (b) Does God command things because they are good? (c) Are things good because God commands them? The student, a Black woman and licensed Baptist minister, answered the questions by asserting that the Bible establishes the commands of God, the Bible is infallible, and the Bible is unquestionable. She went on to write that people are inherently bad; God's commands are rules for molding good, moral, ethical individuals; and Christian ethics is a tool to enforce Christian beliefs for Christians as well as non-Christians.

The student's perspective is not limited to the Black community nor the Baptist church. Their perspective is one that has been established within the Christian tradition for more than a millennium. Yet, their fundamentalist point of view is not the solitary viewpoint within Christianity. Furthermore, the idea that the Holy Writ governs individuals and communities is not limited to Christianity. A student of Judaism or Islam might share this indistinguishable belief. In short, the student's response *could be* interpreted as Biblically sound. Later, I will address interpretation and how interpretation shapes the way we read, understand, and form a belief or an opinion. For now, I want to return to my exchange with the student.

I responded to the student by commenting on their essay. I asked, if the Bible is the infallible, unquestionable, command of God, why are you studying to complete a Master of Christian Education? *And* how did you, as a woman, become a minister in a Black Baptist church? In my opinion, to study the Bible is to be inquisitive about and interested in its history, its ideas, and its implications for its readers. If it is true that the Bible is infallible and indisputable, as the student suggested, then studying to complete a Master of Christian Education degree is futile. Equally, if the Bible is unquestionable, then it is without question that a woman should not speak until she is given permission by a man (according to the Bible). On the one hand, I wanted to challenge the student with questions that would cause her to consider the implications of understanding the Bible as infallible and indisputable. On the other hand, I wanted to challenge the student to consider the use of the Bible as a tool to empower some and disempower others, particularly the empowerment of men and the disempowerment of women. The questions I asked, written on the student's essay, were based on two New Testament texts. The first textual reference reads, "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says" (1st Corinthians 14:34, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]). The second textual reference reads, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1st Timothy 2:12, NRSV). Had she considered the historical, communal, and individual effects of her beliefs? I was challenging the student to reflect on their lived experiences in relation to their Biblical interpretation. Regrettably, the student was displeased and offended by my critique of their theological interpretation.

Patricia Hill-Collins, sociologist and leading Black feminist scholar, informs my understanding of the dynamics at play with my student. In her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Hill-Collins (2009) centers the experiences of Black women as she addresses ideology, injustice, power dynamics, and social control. Hill-Collins writes, “Taken together, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place” (p. 7). Ideology refers to the shared ideas which reflect an institution like Christianity or a group of people. Historically, Christianity has perpetuated racist and sexist ideologies which are oppressive. Within U.S. culture, Christianity has maintained its dominance through its shared ideas that permeate our society. A few examples of these shared ideas are: (a) a “good” citizen *believes* in the God of the Christian faith; (b) a “good” citizen does not question authority because authorities are predetermined by God; (c) the idea that “believers” and “non-believers” should not question authority is connected to the idea that God should not be questioned as the highest authority; and (d) our U.S. currency is stamped “In God We Trust,” which is code for “American capitalism is made sacred by God.” These shared ideas are links in a historical chain of White, male, heteronormative, nationalistic, capitalistic, Christian dominance (Hill-Collins, 2009).

In the context of my class, the history of suppression and ideology were evident in the belief that the Bible is *the* ballast of a good, moral citizenry and it dare not be questioned. As a Black woman, studying to be/become a Christian educator, the student perpetuated the “truth” she was taught without questioning the ways her body and lived

experiences disrupted/interrupted that “truth.” I wanted the student to grasp the idea that the Bible as infallible, indisputable, and unquestionable *is a tool* used for social control, and it is oppressive. I also wanted her to see her life as a refutation of this idea. The fact that the student responded to my critique with a call, email, and formal meeting with the college’s administrators confirms her agency in questioning authority.

From 2013 to the present, my experience with this particular student has continued to reverberate in my mind. Prior to studying critical pedagogy, I had not considered the ways sustained reflection might open the door to exploring teaching and learning possibilities. By reflecting on one course, through a critical pedagogical lens, I began to query how I might have engaged the student(s) and the classroom differently. Reflecting on the experience led me to ask questions such as: What assumptions did I make about the student? What assumptions did the student make about me? Did the student assume I was theologically liberal? Did I assume the student was theologically conservative? How is the classroom shaped by different theological perspectives? What am I to learn from the teaching experience? How might I be shaped and shape the work of other educators by mining this teaching experience? Considering these questions, I might have benefitted from a combined course in critical pedagogy/Black liberation theology.

The “Introduction to Ethics” course continues to shape my epistemological and philosophical understandings of education. I was not satisfied then nor am I satisfied now with teaching practices that do not foster critical inquiry, critical thinking, and critical agency via the classroom. I believe critical liberative theological consciousness/education

has the potential to emancipate students from their unconscious participation in the social order (Gross, 2011; Levinson, 2011; Säfström, 2011; Schwalbe, 2008) by inviting them to be/become self-actualized thinkers and actors (Trelstad, 2008). Without critical consideration for the implications of interpreting a text as infallible and unquestionable, students will perpetuate cycles of domination and oppression. Earnestly, I believe the student shared the ideological perspective that in questioning the Bible they were questioning God. Correspondingly, I believe she thought and acted on the notion of an indisputable, infallible Bible because she was “schooled” by her church and society-at-large (Freire, 1970/2003; Kincheloe, 2008; Villaverde, 2015). Conversely, and more importantly, the fact that she was a licensed minister in a Black Baptist church, in a denomination that does not officially affirm the ordination of women, demonstrates a disruption of “schooling” as a form of social control.

Being a graduate student, I was not the first teacher the student learned from. She was learning from various faculty members at Carolina Christian College and I assume she was learning from teachers outside of Carolina Christian College. She may have participated in schooling designed by her church/denomination and/or pastor. For example, Baptist Training Union (BTU) has been a part of the African American Baptist Church for many years. BTU, an element of Christian education, was designed to instruct all members in basic Bible beliefs, Baptist doctrine, church membership, discipline, policy, and procedures. Or, if she did not participate in BTU, it is very likely she completed classes, readings, written assignments, and ministry projects determined by her pastor to prepare her for ordination, as a minister-in-training. Ministry training is not

limited to the purview of the *formal* classroom and all churches/denominations *do not* require that a minister complete a graduate degree.

On the surface, it seems that my student was not taught to question her Biblical understanding within the context of her life as a Black woman. I assume this was the case. Despite my assumption, she was present for the class. On some level, she had to have been living with a question(s) or a story that kept her engaged. Candidly, she could have withdrawn from the class and registered for a different class. She could have chosen a different teacher to learn from and with. As her teacher, I understood her theological perspective because, throughout my life, I have known similar teachings.

As I considered the similarities and differences between us, I reflected on the perceived similarities and differences of our learning experiences. As a Black man and Baptist minister, I know *some* religious teachings are habitually used to oppress, dehumanize, and discipline bodies (i.e., individual, communal) in ways that are contrary to mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom. I remember, for example, being taught opposing ideas about women and leadership. In one church, I was taught that women could lead, but they should not overshadow the leadership of men. In a different church, I was taught that women were equal to men and could lead in any capacity. In the community, I saw many women sit silently among men. I also saw women lead conversations in the company of men.

As a Master of Divinity student, studying Christian history, Black religious experience, and culture and society, I was introduced to and began to understand the various ways “schooling” influences the society we live in, the communities we are born

into, and the ways we are socially conditioned. I focused my studies on African American educators who were active members of the Christian community. I took a special interest in Benjamin E. Mays, a Baptist minister, and Mary McLeod Bethune, a Presbyterian missionary, because they confronted oppression during the Jim Crow Era of the 20th century. For these teacher-educators, education was not about providing simple answers to complex issues such as classism, sexism, and White supremacy in America. For them, education was a means to liberation. I concentrated on these educators because I read them as embodying education as a critical liberative praxis (Brock, 2010; Freire, 1970/2003; hooks, 1994; Mays, 1971). As a critical liberative praxis, education is an exercise in which both teachers and students participate (Boler, 2004; Carter, 1998; Darder, 2002), a way of being and doing that pronounces hope, change, and liberation. African American educators such as Benjamin E. Mays and Mary McLeod Bethune taught students to think for themselves, be/become self-actualized, and be/become active members of their communities (i.e., church, college, state, nation) (Carter, 1998). As a result, I perceive liberation, the central motif of this project, not as an end/goal, but as a process of learning to think and act *freely* as a responsible member of the community.

Significance of the Study

I have not always known how to ask critical questions and read critically. By reflecting on my experiences as a student, I began appreciating ways I have been shaped by critical and non-critical teaching practices. I learned to critically engage ideas and texts because of teachers who challenged my worldview by assigning essays, readings, and projects that opened my mind to new ways of thinking. The theological classroom at

Wake Forest University School of Divinity provided me with tools to critically read, question, and respond to Biblical as well as non-Biblical texts. By researching critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology as critical social theories, I set out to accomplish several goals: (a) propose ways to critically read and question biblical as well as non-biblical texts, (b) extend pedagogical practices that cultivate students as critical responders, and (c) develop a theoretical framework for a critical liberative theological pedagogy. Owing to the context of my lived experiences as a student, a minister, and a teacher, I am compelled to explore the ways an educator/minister can teach students to challenge systematic and systemic oppression.

As a critical researcher struggling for equality, equity, justice, and liberation *for all*, changing *unjust* social systems is my principal motivation. I believe it is my responsibility to challenge systematic and systemic injustices that shape individual and communal lives. Equally, I believe the classroom is a space for encouraging students to develop their critical inquiry, critical thinking, and critical agency potential. Inviting students to critically examine their knowledge, as they engage their lived experiences, is necessary for constructive social change because it urges students to imagine a different social order (Bettez, 2011; Darder, 2002; hooks, 1994; Säfström, 2011). Through critical liberative theological education, students may well be/become agents of attitudinal, institutional, and societal change.

I developed research questions that are guideposts for forming a critical perspective on teaching in the theological classroom because I believe the tenets of critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology have the potential to enhance the mission

of theological education in academic communities. Without the experience of teaching a combined course in critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology, I imagine educational possibilities birthed out of experience and research. Therefore, my research questions are lampposts for lighting the way *Toward a Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness*. The questions are intended to shape a dialogue between critical pedagogues, Black liberation theologians, and me that will provide a vision for cultivating agents of social change.

My hope is that readers will grow in their critical consciousness through an educative praxis that invites them to peel back the layers of their social existence in order to undergo a process of liberation. My primary goals are for readers to identify injustice and envisage ways to change systems of inequality. I aim to guide readers in a process of analyzing critical pedagogical and liberative theological texts for their wisdom regarding *agency, liberation, and the relief of oppression*. I believe the wisdom of each text will be discerned through the method/ology of the research process. Accordingly, my research questions are:

1. What wisdom might theological education, in an academic setting, gain from a dialogue between critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology?
2. How might a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness, as a theoretical framework, take shape in light of the dialogue?

In a diverse world with people of differing perspectives, students must learn to reflect on their worldviews as they engage the worldviews of others. Without the wherewithal to question, think, and act critically, students will fall short of participating

in the process of education as a critical liberative praxis. The encounter with my student interrupted my worldview. First, I recognize that I do not believe the Bible is unquestionable and infallible. Furthermore, I do not believe any text is unquestionable and infallible. Texts are written by fallible human beings; therefore, understanding how a text does or does not intersect with the reality of my life is a key element which drives my questioning. In this way, it is challenging for me to understand why a student would accept “truth” without questioning its validity. I believe lived experiences are the best learning/teaching experiences. For this reason, I invite students to discuss their lived experiences, offer the lessons they have learned from their lived experiences, and how their lived experiences shape the ways they participate in the world.

As a social institution, Christianity has shaped and continues to shape the worldviews of individuals and communities in helpful and harmful ways. As I reflect on my student’s frustration, I know I could have been transparent about my worldview and the influence of my worldview on my teaching practices. Second, I do not believe the acquisition of knowledge only happens in a classroom, between a teacher and their students. As it pertains to theological education, I do not believe the construction of knowledge should be limited to the walls of the academy. Third, I failed to utilize a text written by an African American woman. The readings I required were written by men (i.e., Black, White). I should have included a text that represented the majority of the students (i.e., African American women). Incorporating a text written by an African American woman may have given me and my students the opportunity to experience the world differently.

Within the academy, critical scholars of education (i.e., critical pedagogy) and theology (i.e., Black liberation theology) are striving to (de)construct educative practices that are detrimental to individuals as well as communities and (re)construct educative practices that are liberative. Unfortunately, religious teachings such as “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling...” (Ephesians 6:5) have been and are used to oppress as opposed to liberate. During the era of slavery, European teachers, preachers, politicians, and economists employed this teaching to oppress Black bodies. But critical pedagogues, though they would not have defined themselves as such, used (re)constructive texts. For example, “Thus says the Lord: Let my people go...” (Exodus 8:20) was a central teaching used by abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth and revolutionaries such as Nat Turner to liberate enslaved bodies.

Censuring LGBTQ bodies is a present-day example of oppression. “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22) is a central teaching used to condemn LGBTQ persons. They are discriminated against in various aspects and institutions of our society because they are not affirmed as equal members. They are denied civil rights because of their “lifestyle.” But, critical theologians such as Bishop Yvette A. Flunder of the City of Refuge United Church of Christ, Oakland, CA, and Bishop William J. Barber, II of the Greenleaf Christian Church, Goldsboro, NC, use (re)constructive texts to affirm LGBTQ persons. “For it was [God] who formed my inward parts; [God] knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13) and “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth...” (Matthew 19:12) are central teachings used by Bishops Flunder and Barber to liberate censured bodies. Matthew, the author of

the gospel, is quoting Jesus. And the term eunuch was a first century term for homosexual (Ellison & Douglas, 2010). Critical liberative theological consciousness/education is a process of liberating individuals as well as communities, teachers and students alike, from the tentacles of repressive teachings because it invites critical inquiry and critical response.

The teacher-educator is a model for attending to societal concerns and, ideally, students will learn to engage the world by addressing social issues (e.g., homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia) that affect the lives of individuals as well as communities (Floyd-Thomas, 2006; Giroux, 2007; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). To state it differently, students gain the skills to be/become leaders through the pedagogical practices of their teacher. Critical liberative theological education has the potential to emancipate by teaching students to be/become self-actualizing thinkers and agents. Justo L. González (2015), author of *The History of Theological Education*, calls for and challenges schools of divinity/theology to allow the context of church and society to lead in teaching and training. He argues the importance of studying the history of theological education because it offers direction for a different approach to the discipline of theological education, present and future.

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) maintains that theological education seeks to develop leaders as it engages the church and the broader society (2003). ATS comprises “more than 270 graduate schools that conduct post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines,” in Canada and the

United States. Collectively, more than 270 member schools enroll nearly 74,500 students and employ more than 7,200 faculty and administrators (ATS, 2003). If theological education intends to prepare students to lead the church and the broader society, I contend that it should do so by appropriating tenets of critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology. In like manner, I argue that studying the history of critical educators and liberation movements, from *the present-past* (1960s), offers wisdom for a (re)conceptualized approach to theological education.

The communal efforts of Black liberation theologians and critical pedagogues are firmly rooted in the lives of individuals, communities, and the (re)imagining of the socially constructed world. Knowing that Christianity is the largest religious tradition in the United States and conservative Christians (i.e., evangelicals) are driving public policies, which are reversing the advances of civil rights legislation for people of color, women, youth, and other marginalized groups, it is impossible to disentangle theological and social transformation. As I participate in the construction of knowledge, I will demonstrate ways a critical liberative theological consciousness might be theologically and socially transformative for the lives of *everyday* people (and all of creation). I will lay the foundation for a theoretical framework that centers critical agency, critical thinking, and critical response as educative goals in the process of liberation.

Selection of Authors and Texts: A Common Bond Within the Historic Project of Liberation: Cone and Freire

The mid-20th century was a treacherous and tumultuous time for marginalized people in the Americas, not unlike our current condition in the first quarter of the 21st

century. Openly practiced racism, police brutality, state sanctioned violence against non-violent protestors, and resistance movements are recognizable similarities between the 1960s and the present. In North America, Black people lived under the constant assault of Jim Crow “law and order,” which enforced racial segregation and White supremacy. In many states, Black people did not have the right to vote. In other states, if they had the right to vote, they lived with the threat of being killed for choosing to exercise their right. Restaurants were segregated. Water fountains were segregated. In the southern United States, many poor Black people were sharecroppers, one step removed from slavery, trying to make a living working for paternalistic landowners. The Civil Rights Movement was one response to the assault on Black lives. The movement was intended to dismantle racial segregation and White supremacy, change all systems of oppression, and retard the history of inequality in the United States. It began with the cries of Black people. It became a campaign for all.

In South America, poor people lived under the constant assault of economic and political instability caused by the neo-colonialism of the United States and social unrest. Military dictatorships, the Marxist Revolution, and the Anti-Imperialist Movement were responses to the economic, political, and social instability (Leopando, 2017). The Marxist Revolution and the Anti-Imperialist Movement were intended to liberate Latin American countries from imperialism, empower disenfranchised/illiterate/poor/working people, and establish governments of the people (i.e., working poor). In many states, illiterate persons did not have the constitutional right to vote. If a person could not read and write, they were bound by the decisions of the aristocracy, business owners, and landowners. It was

1945–1946 when the Brazilian Congress wrote its new constitution excluding illiterate voters (Leopando, 2017). The elite, the aristocrats, wanted to maintain power. The poor were being exploited. On all fronts, the fight for liberation was hard. Many battles were lost and won.

Amidst the struggles for liberation in North and South America, James H. Cone and Paulo Freire emerged as *contested* leaders of cultural, theological, and social change. Paulo Freire’s contribution to the historical project of liberation was contextualized in his work with poor communities in South America. James Cone’s contributions to the historical project of liberation was contextualized in his work with Black communities in North America. In 1973, the liberatory work of Freire and Cone intersected at the Theology in the Americas Conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

On April 1, 1964, Brazil experienced a military overthrow of its government. At the time of the military coup, Paulo Freire was leading the National Literacy Program, which was designed to educate illiterate and poor citizens of Brazil. In June of 1964, Freire was arrested and jailed for nearly three months (Leopando, 2017). He and literacy coordinators were charged with plotting to produce “five million electoral robots for the populist parties, including the communists” (p. 29). They denied any wrongdoing and he attributed his teaching philosophy to his Roman Catholic roots. At the time of his arrest, Freire was and had been active in the Catholic Left Movement (CLM), a movement that emerged in the 1940s. CLM, also known as the Brazilian Catholic Left, was a response to “traditional” Catholicism, which emphasized “respect for authority, the patriarchal

family, prayer and private devotion” (p. 2). The conservative members of the Church hierarchy supported the authoritarian, paternalistic culture of Brazil.

It is no surprise, then, that the “traditional” teachings of the Roman Catholic Church did not address the economic, political, and social inequalities of the poor. Nevertheless, Freire’s pedagogy was so entwined with his faith that he professed, “When I first went to meet with workers and peasants in Recife’s slums, to teach them and to learn from them, I have to confess that I did that *pushed by my Christian faith* [my emphasis]” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 245). Freire’s theological reflection was shaped by his lived experience in Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil and his Biblical understanding of God. He wrote,

Because I experienced poverty, I never allowed myself to fall into fatalism...I never accepted our precarious situation as an expression of God’s wishes. On the contrary, I began to understand that something really wrong with the world needed to be fixed. (Freire, 1996, p. 28)

Guided by his Christian faith, from the late 1940s through the late 1960s, Freire taught and wrote within a counter-hegemonic movement opposing authoritarianism, paternalism, and exploitation. He began articulating the liberatory possibilities of literacy with his dissertation, in 1959, at the University of Pernambuco, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. His dissertation became the basis for *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967/1973). Yet, his seminal work, and the work he is most famous for, is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). The central concern of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the liberation of the Brazilian poor from illiteracy.

As a minister with the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a Black man wrestling with his rage, James H. Cone found himself betwixt the non-violent approach of Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Civil Rights Movement and the “by any means necessary” approach of Malcolm X of the Black Power Movement. Beginning with his lived experience in Bearden, Arkansas, he “sought to deepen [his] conviction that the God of biblical faith and Black religion is best known as the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. ix). Cone articulated the ways his hermeneutic (i.e., interpretation of scripture) was rooted in his experiences with a marginalized people. He also expressed the ways the hermeneutic of many White theologians was rooted in their experiences with a dominant people. “The God of biblical faith and Black religion is partial toward the weak,” he wrote (pp. x–xi). With the Bible and lived experience dialectically sourcing his theological reflections, Cone argued that God, in Jesus Christ (past, present, future), liberates the oppressed. He began articulating Black liberation theology with *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). He continued his work with *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970/1986) and reached a crescendo with *God of the Oppressed* (1975/1997). The central concern of *God of the Oppressed* is the liberation of the Black community from White supremacy and racism in the United States. Guided by his Christian faith, Cone taught and wrote within the context of the Black Freedom Movement, opposing White racist churches, theologies, and supremacy.

Not everyone responded in the same manner to the assault on Black lives. With the lows of the Civil Rights Movement, young leaders like Stokely Carmichael were not satisfied with the “slow” pace of Martin Luther King, Jr., and leaders of the Southern

Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). The Black church in the South, which led the Civil Rights Movement, was slowly losing its credibility (Gross & Shorrock, *Fresh Air*, 2008). Black people in the South and the North were becoming frustrated with the “slow” pace of the church’s “love thy neighbor” approach. The Black Power Movement was about advancing justice and equality, now.

The central argument of Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969/2018) was that there is no contradiction between the social justice orientation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. Cone argued that Black Power is for liberation; Jesus Christ is for liberation; therefore, Black Power is a contemporary expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in America (Gross & Shorrock, *Fresh Air*, 2008). In so doing, he ruptured and positively altered the theological world by combining Black *with* Theology – the freedom struggle of the oppressed *with* the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Cone’s works were a major catalyst for liberation theologies in the United States and the world.

Earlier, I asserted that critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology are two seemingly different schools of thought. I said seemingly because critical pedagogy is attributed to Freire through the vein of Marxism. Freire employed Marxist theory in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but to conclude that Marxist thought is the guiding light of his work, which critical pedagogy (as a discipline) does, is to dismiss the arc of Freire’s life as a Roman Catholic (Cone & Wilmore, 1993; Gutiérrez, 1988; Leopando, 2017; Torres & Eagleson, 1976). A careful study of Freire’s life reveals that he was counted among Latin American liberation theologians in the 1960s and 1970s. According to

Father Sergio Torres, Chilean priest and organizer of Theology in the Americas (1975), “Names of Catholic liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assman, Juan Luis Segundo, and Paulo Freire soon became well known in U.S. theological communities” (Torres & Eagleson, 1976, p. 12).

Prior to its official naming, Latin American liberation theology was known as Roman Catholic liberation theology. It was considered a “new theology” in 1968 when it was officially recognized by the Medellín Conference of Latin America (Torres & Eagleson, 1976, p. 12). Freire’s presence in the theological world was established by his work with the Catholic Leftist Movement in Recife (1944–1964), the Christian Democratic Agrarian Reform Movement in Chile (1964–1969), and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva (1969–1980). It was during Freire’s time with the World Council of Churches that he and James Cone, Latin American liberation theology and Black liberation theology, met in 1973.

Addressing the symposium at the World Council of Churches, Cone (1973) said,

This event was not for the purpose of discussions between [Black and Latin] theologians but, rather, to introduce them both on the agenda of the WCC, whose theological focus was so decidedly European...In connection with our mutual condemnation of European theology, we began to ask about the differences among Black theologians and Latin American theologians. The matter was touched on in a comment by Paulo Freire and then addressed pointedly by Hugo Assman, who suggested that we needed to discuss among ourselves the issues of color and class. (Cone & Wilmore, 1993, p. 354)

Cone continued by stating he began to respond to Freire and Assman, but the presence of the European theologians prohibited the exploration of their concerns. Fortunately, Cone

and Wilmore (1993) included excerpts of Freire and Assman's statements in *Black*

Theology: A Documentary History Volume One: 1966–1979. Freire said,

We come to a meeting like this previously conditioned ideologically by this false concept of knowledge. And so instead of trying to look at the complete context in which we live and experience, we come looking for answers and prescriptions and transference of knowledge. That is my first observation. My second observation is a challenge. There is a dialectical relationship between thinking and acting. We think and act in context: no language without context; no text without context. I look at my friend James Cone, whom I admire, as a Third World man – it does not matter that he was born in the United States – it's an accident. He is a Third World man because he was born in the world of dependence – of exploitation – within the First World. So our way of thinking is absolutely conditioned by our existential experience in your context. (pp. 404–405)

Cone and Freire lived, breathed, tasted oppression in their countries, states, and cities; oppression that was a by-product of European colonization. As members of marginalized groups, they knew what it was to be dismissed, dehumanized, and rendered invisible by those in power. Yet, they believed that God, embodied in Jesus, called them to change the world in which they lived. Their belief shaped their actions as educators, theologians, and writers.

I approach *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed* with the thought that these texts have something to say about the educative process in the critical liberative theological classroom. I also recognize that these texts are *other* to me. History and tradition are lenses through which I am motivated by and connect with the liberative themes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, but I did not live the historic moments that Paulo Freire and James Cone narrate. In the case of James Cone, as two Black men born in the United States, reared in the South, we share a history of

Slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, Christianity, and the struggle of being Black in a world of White supremacy. Even so, our experiences are unique because our historic struggles with injustice are different. In the case of Paulo Freire, as two Christians who became critical educators, believing in the liberative teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, we share a history of European colonization, the Human Rights Movement, and the struggle against a “culture of silence.” Even so, our experiences are unique because our historic struggles with inequality are not the same. Consequently, I critically read to gain a deeper understanding of these texts, the context/history of these texts, the authors of these texts, the context/history of the authors, and my own context/history in relation to these texts - to discern *meaning* corresponding to contemporary possibilities in the critical liberative theological classroom.

As I perceive it, the activism, theology, and pedagogy of Cone and Freire remain guideposts for theological and social transformation in the 21st century. Furthermore, I contend that, although Freire is known for his critical pedagogy, his theology can be discerned through a close reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Likewise, although Cone is known for his Black liberation theology, I contend that his pedagogy can be discerned through a close reading of *God of the Oppressed*. In reading for Freire’s theology and Cone’s pedagogy, I acknowledge that my context informs my approach to and interpretation of the historic project of liberation.

Critical and Theoretical Underpinnings: Hermeneutics as Research *Methodology*

As a teacher-researcher, seeking to dialogue with and gain wisdom from authors concerned with social change, critical pedagogical and liberative theological texts are the

focus of my hermeneutical inquiry. Slattery (2013) writes, “Hermeneutics is the art and process of interpretation that can lead not only to understanding but also to personal growth and social progress” (p. 134). Matthew R. Malcolm, new testament scholar and author of *From Hermeneutics to Exegesis: The Trajectory of Biblical Interpretation* (2018), defines hermeneutics as “the study of what is happening when effective interpretation or understanding takes place” (p. 5). According to Thiselton, “Hermeneutics is no one single thing, but a vast variety of interpretative strategies, each of which depends for its value and effectiveness on the nature of the text and the varied goals and situations of readers” (as cited in Malcolm, 2018, p. 118). Lincoln and Denzin (1998), Fee and Stuart (1993), and Schneiders (1981) argue that hermeneutics *is not* easily defined because it has been defined within numerous disciplines. Yet, as a methodology of understanding, hermeneutics allows the researcher to draw on their experiential and cultural knowledge (Lincoln & Denzin, 1998). In the same way, hermeneutics grants me the freedom to embrace my cultural and experiential knowledge in the academy and the church. I submit that a dialogue with James Cone and Paulo Freire, by way of *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, will guide me (and readers) toward a deeper understanding of liberation as a theological and pedagogical process. Therefore, I claim hermeneutics as searching out the wisdom of critical pedagogical and liberative theological texts to put forward an interpretation concerning the cultivation of students as agents of social change (Byrne, 2001; Harvey, 1992; McKim, 1996).

My research is within the sphere of hermeneutics, in general, and critical hermeneutics, specifically, because my inquiry moves beyond a simple interpretive process to include issues of ideology and power. Hans Georg-Gadamer, a 20th century German scholar, is regarded as the founder of philosophical and critical hermeneutics (Kinsella, 2006; Malcolm, 2018; Pokorny, 2011). Paul Ricoeur, likewise, is considered a principal theorist of critical hermeneutics (Byrne, 2001; Lincoln & Denzin, 1998; Schneiders, 1981). The influential text of Gadamer is *Truth and Method*. And the influential text of Ricoeur is *Interpretation Theory* (Malcolm 2018, Schneiders, 1981). Critical hermeneutics addresses issues of power and ideology and situates hermeneutic analysis in a wider historical and social framework (Kinsella, 2006).

As readers of texts, we may not be aware of the ways we have been and are conditioned to read. Our lived experiences, educational experiences, and social experiences shape the ways we interact with texts. For example, when the student asserted that the Bible establishes the commands of God, they were reading the Bible through a particular Christian lens, their beliefs about God, and the teachings of their church/community. Without critically questioning their beliefs, the teachings of their church/community, and their Christian lens, the student did not recognize the ways they were conditioned to read the Bible. The student read the Bible as *thee* text which establishes the rules, “law and order,” of the society we live in. She was not reading the text in a way that centered her communal history, as a Black person, and/or lived experiences as a woman marginalized by dominant interpretations of the Bible. To state it differently, the student’s reading of the Bible was shaped by dominant ideologies. To

read the Bible and ask critical questions regarding its relationship to current realities of marginalization is to dialogue with the text about power, which influences interpretation. With this in mind, I turn to Gadamer and Ricoeur to help explicate the correlation between a text, the reading of a text, the process of interpreting a text, and interpretation beyond the text.

According to Gadamer, dialogue is a helpful parallel for interpretation. When reading a text, as with dialogue, the intent is not simply to agree with the author or to understand the author, but to come with the author to a different level of understanding regarding the subject being addressed (Schneiders, 1981; Slattery, 2013). The reader engages the text as a person willing to dialogue with the text and question the subject matter of the text. The central idea being to gain an understanding of the subject. The text is *other* to the reader. The reader is *other* to the text. The text and the reader have different “horizons.” In the journey of the hermeneutical encounter, the text and the reader experience a “fusion of horizons” and out of that fusion a new horizon emerges (Malcolm, 2018; Pokorny, 2011).

As it relates to the Bible, Gadamer critiqued 19th century historicists whose central question was “What does the text say?” as opposed to focusing on “What does the text say for the contemporary reader?” (Schneiders, 1981, p. 5). Historical critics were not engaging the Biblical text at the level of its truth claims by only asking “What does the text say?” Their question restricted the text to its historical context. And a text that is restricted to its historical context signals that its meaning is isolated to the intended – original – audience without regard for its contemporary applications and implications. To

move beyond the historical context, the reader must analyze the content of the text to interpret it for its contemporary implications and applications. This process, within biblical/theological/homiletical studies, is known as exegesis.

Gadamer was concerned that if a reader is solely asking “What does the text say?” a reader will not face the challenge of being changed by the text because a reader will not have engrossed themselves in the truth of the subject matter. Rather, a reader will merely be agreeing or disagreeing with the author’s truth. For a genuine dialogue, as with a layered, robust interpretation of a text, the partner (i.e., reader) must enter in to the conversation seeking to understand what the other (i.e., author) is saying and the truth of their saying, concerning the subject matter (Schneiders, 1981; Slattery, 2013). “The purpose of interpretation,” says Gadamer (1975), “is to come closer to the truth on the subject by letting the text challenge our preconceptions and by questioning the text from our perspective so that it yields more...than it could when originally composed” (pp. 270–274). Gadamer’s statement suggests that a reader cannot have a genuine dialogue with a text if they are unwilling to say what they do or do not think about the subject and allow themselves to be moved, potentially changed, by it (Malcolm, 2018; Schneiders, 1981). Petr Pokorny (2011), a new testament theologian and author of *Hermeneutics as a Theory of Understanding*, writes, “[The hermeneutical encounter] is a matter of the reconstruction of the reader’s thinking, in which confrontation with the text and its world has led to the opening-up of the reader’s life world” (p. 184). Anthony C. Thiselton, Church of England priest and theologian, states,

Texts...open new horizons for readers. Because of their capacity to bring about change, texts and especially biblical texts engage with readers in ways which can productively *transform* horizons, attitudes, criteria of relevance, or even communities and inter-personal situations...The very process of reading may lead to a re-ranking of expectations, assumptions, and goals which readers initially bring to texts. (as cited in Malcolm, 2018, pp. 79–80)

Whereas Gadamer reasoned that there is a one-to-one correlation between a written text and a dialogue, Ricoeur, a 20th century French philosopher, challenged the idea (Schneiders, 1981). He asserted that the process of communication changes with writing (Pokorny, 2011; Schneiders, 1981). In a dialogue, persons can communicate in a way that allows them to express and re-express themselves until they are understood. But, once a text is written, an author cannot re-express themselves so that the reader may understand their original intent/meaning. The author's words become independent of the author's intent once a text is written. In this way, the reader may interpret the meaning of the text based on the words *written* and not the author's intent (Pokorny, 2011; Schneiders, 1981). Still, the intent of the author is decisive because the author wrote with an audience in mind.

For Ricoeur, the way an author composes a text, whether narrative, poetry, or play is important because it shapes the interpretative process. Having an audience in mind, the author intends to involve the reader. For example, the intended audiences of James Cone's *God of the Oppressed* (1975/1997) were Black people living with the realities of Jim Crow laws, White Christians, and critics (i.e., Black, White) who challenged his interpretation of Black religion and biblical faith. Cone involved his audience by challenging them to re-interpret Biblical stories and God from the standpoint of the

oppressed. Although Cone's intended audiences were oppressed Black citizens of the 1960s and 70s, White Christians, and critics, *God of the Oppressed* was not restricted to its intended – original – audience. In other words, once *God of the Oppressed* was written, anyone who read it became its audience.

Each reader or community of readers reads a text from their “locatedness” (Malcolm, 2018; Schneiders, 1981). As such, a text moves beyond its original audience and the originating context. Ricoeur argued that the “aboutness” of a text loses a direct correlation with the “saying” of a text when it is written and read by subsequent readers. With the movement of time, the written text becomes contemporaneous with the complexities of the condition of current readers (Cosby, 2001; Schneiders, 1981). However, if subsequent readers are to have a critical understanding of a text, their reading will include a grasp of the originating context and an awareness of the original audience (Cosby, 2001; Pokorny, 2011; Schneiders, 1981). When *God of the Oppressed* was published in 1975 critics rebuked Cone's assertion that “the God of biblical faith and Black religion is partial toward the weak” (1975/1997, pp. x–xi). On the one hand, Cone's *saying* spoke directly to the oppression of Black people, individually and collectively, in the United States. On the other hand, the systematic and systemic oppression of the weak (i.e., marginalized) is the core of the *aboutness* of *God of the Oppressed*. Therefore, the “aboutness” moved beyond the “saying” because the text addressed and still addresses readers who experience systematic and systemic oppression.

Ricoeur's theory of text informs the process of interpretation in several important ways. First, the text is not limited to the author's intent. Second, the text is not limited to

the original audience. Third, the text is not limited to its “saying.” Fourth, the text, as it is, holds meaning for the contemporary reader. These are important factors because they signal that multiple interpretations are possible given that the reader is a participant with the text, searching for meaning (Cosby, 2001; Pokorny, 2011; Schneiders, 1981). In the end, a complex, layered interpretation of a text, will include a critical comprehension of its history, its author, its original audience, its historical implications, its contemporary audience, and its contemporary implications.

Hermeneutics and Biblical Interpretation

Historically, in Western thought, hermeneutics is defined as the interpretation of Biblical texts (Byrne, 2001). As a well-known text, the Bible has a two-millennia history (since its canonization) and some argue it is the most popular book of all time (Grabianowski, 2011). It has been translated into multiple languages and read by a countless number of communities. Throughout its history, there have been individuals and communities who have interpreted the Bible as the “literal” word of God. In the 21st century, there are individuals, like my former student, who continue to interpret the Bible as God’s word - verbatim.

In the United States, fundamentalists or evangelical Christians are most often described as Biblical literalists. Fundamentalism is a term for a 20th century American *evangelicalism* that sought to preserve conservative Protestant views and values *against* liberal theology and the historical criticism of scripture. A strong focus of fundamentalism is the inerrancy and literal interpretation of scripture (McKim, 1996). However, fundamentalists are not the only Christians who can be described as

interpreting the Bible literally. According to a Gallup Poll, 30% of Christians (i.e., Catholic, Protestant) interpret the Bible literally. Nearly 50% of Christians interpret the Bible as the inspired word of God (i.e., non-literal) and 17% interpret the Bible as an ancient book of stories (Jones, 2011).

As the Gallup Poll infers, Christians are making meaning of the Bible, its words, and its stories differently. Individuals as well as communities survey the text for potential answers to life's ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty based on who they are, where they are, and what they believe. In other words, Biblical interpretation is based on the "locatedness" of the reader. Malcolm (2018) writes, "feminist, womanist, liberationist, and postcolonial approaches to interpretation aim to highlight and consciously destabilize readings of biblical texts...among readers who are perhaps ignorant of their own locatedness in strongholds of political, social, racial, ethnic, or sexual power" (p. 41). In the case of my student and I, given our racial, political, and social history as Black people, I assumed our interpretations of the Bible would have been closely aligned. However, we indeed interpreted the Bible differently. I interpret the Bible as the inspired word of God. She interpreted the Bible as the literal word of God. Yet, the Bible is a central text through which both of us read the world.

As I perceive it, interpretation moves at the point of meaning making because Biblical stories are open to diverse interpretations based on the "locatedness" of the reader (Malcolm, 2018). For that reason, I am compelled to ask several questions: What does interpretation have to do with reading the Bible? How have Biblical stories been interpreted? How might the history of Biblical stories influence contemporary readers?

What are critical ways to interpret Biblical stories that speak to social relevance?

Underlying my cultural, historical, and theological approach is the belief that scripture can (and does) have something to say about contemporary life (i.e., equality, equity, justice) (Cosby, 2011).

As Christians manage the experiences of their lives and their communities, they search the Bible for meaning (Cannon, 2006; Cone, 1975/1997; Cosby, 2001; Schneiders, 1981). Fee and Stuart (1993) tell us that readers have a need to interpret the Bible because of its “eternal relevance and historical particularity” (p. 17). In other words, the Bible speaks to the eternity of God, the historicity of humankind, and the contemporary relevance of both. Thus, interpretation is significantly shaped by lived experience, knowledge, and understanding (Byrne, 2001; Malcolm, 2018; Pokorny, 2011).

But, is the hermeneutic process limited to the Bible? *The answer is no.* Centuries before Christianity, Western thought, and European colonization, ancient Mesopotamian scribes wrote commentaries on divination treatises and other literary works to explain the meaning of cuneiform (*translated* - “wedge shaped” writing) (Frahm, 2011).

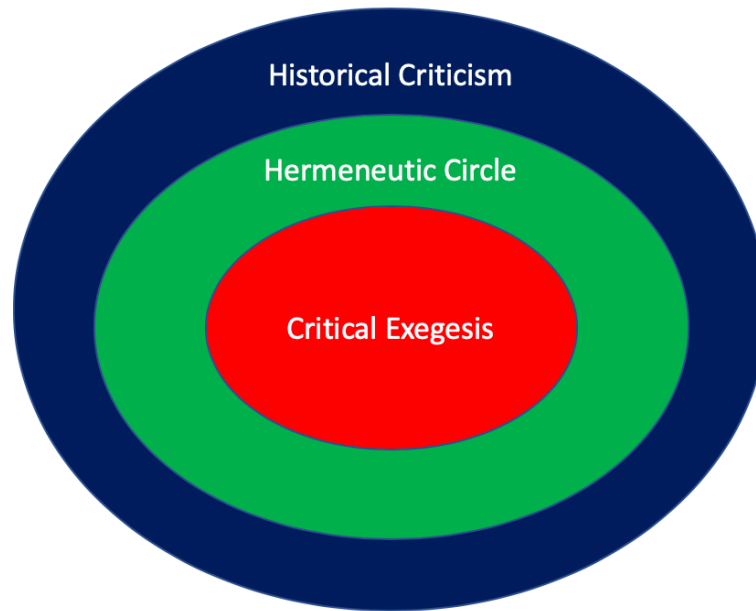
Furthermore, over the course of time, hermeneutics has grown beyond the interpretation (or analysis) of biblical/divine texts to include broader perspectives for understanding humanity (i.e., cultural, educational, environmental, medical, psychological) (Byrne, 2001; Mantzavinos, 2016).

Critical and Pedagogical Orientations to Hermeneutics: Historical Criticism as Research *Method*

Interpretation is a process which, if critically engaged, invites a reader to move beneath and between the layers of a text, their relationship to a text, and their lived experience to develop a robust understanding of a present moment, offering a new or different way of approaching social realities. Therefore, moving from critical hermeneutics as methodology to historical criticism as method is important for critically analyzing and interpreting *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Historical criticism is a method for moving between the history of the text, its author, and the historic moment of the reader/researcher; thereby, drawing the researcher into a hermeneutic circle, which is a dialogue between the world of the text and the world of the reader/researcher. With these two worlds in dialogue, I applied critical exegesis—a guide for “interviewing” the texts—in order to think with the texts about approaches to cultivating student-citizens as agents of change and responding to contemporary realities caused by systems of oppressions. Figure 1.1 is a visual representation of the connection between historical criticism, the hermeneutic circle, and critical exegesis.

Figure 1.1

Visual Representation: Historical Criticism, Hermeneutic Circle, and Critical Exegesis



Historical Criticism

Historical criticism, also known as the historical-critical method (McKim, 1996), is a way of studying a text according to its historical setting(s). This includes its author, circumstances, how/why it came to be written, and the audience(s) addressed. The “critical” in historical criticism is the recognition that a text, if it is to be discerned for contemporary meaning, cannot be abstracted from its historical context. If a text is abstracted, then it loses its ability to speak for itself because the reader reads their own ideas into the text (Malcolm, 2018; Pokorny, 2011). The “critical” in historical criticism also recognizes that the *meaning* of a text is *not* limited to its historical context (Malcolm, 2018; McKim, 1996; Nance, 2015; Pokorny, 2011).

Historical criticism is a method for critically deconstructing and critically reconstructing a text to interpret it for present history and future possibilities. Understanding the historical complexities of a text and its author is a critical step in the interpretive process. Without a shared understanding of common features of the contemporary world and the world of the text, my reality and the reality of Cone and Freire, I will not be able to offer a hearty interpretation of our dialogue for the framing of a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness.

“Historical criticism,” writes Malcolm (2018), “is the critical analysis of texts in light of the historical elements *in* and *behind* those texts [my emphasis]” (p. 119). Robert Morgan (2013), University of Oxford theologian and author of *Biblical Hermeneutics and Critical Responsibility*, writes, “Historical criticism changes the focus from the texts themselves to their context or the history behind them” (p. 37). In his presentation titled *What is Historical Criticism?* Tim Nance (2013), teacher and literary critic, states, “Historical criticism is concerned with the context of the text, the life and times of the author.” Pokorny (2011) advises us that historical criticism is the “critical analysis of the relationship of texts to history” (p. 86).

He continues,

A text did not come into existence to return us to the past about which it speaks, but to show the world in a new light. It cannot just reproduce “reality” for the simple reason that it cannot mediate a direct relationship to it, and furthermore, it is always seeking to change [reality], to set it in a certain framework and to look behind what is given on the direct stage of history. (p. 86)

I am utilizing historical criticism to understand key critical pedagogical and liberative theological concepts present in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, including the authors' main purposes, intents, and critical functions. My overarching objective is to listen for the pedagogy of Cone and the theology of Freire so as to theorize a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness. I engage the critical hermeneutical process with Cone and Freire so that, through dialogue, we might form a "new horizon" – a new approach to contemporary realities caused by systems of oppression (Pokorny, 2011, p. 101). In using historical criticism for this project, I also offer it as a way for students to critically read and dialogue with texts. My goal in employing historical criticism and critical exegesis is to aid students in developing reading strategies that will alter their reality. I do not offer historical criticism as *the* method for reading texts. I do, however, trust that historical criticism will aid students in developing robust interpretations of texts. Students read with their own intuitions and perceptions based on their history and lived experiences. In the same way, I read with unique intuitions and perceptions based on my history and lived experiences. We each read "the world and the word" based on our "locatedness" (Freire, 1996; Malcolm, 2018).

I perceive participatory readership and critical literacy as strategies which lead to critical transformation. Gadamer (1975) maintains, "The purpose of interpretation is to come closer to the truth of the subject by letting the text challenge our preconceptions and by questioning the text from our perspective" (pp. 270–274). The "locatedness" of a reader is an important factor and it influences how and why the text is read. And, a participatory readership requires an attention to relational interpretation, that the

interpretation cannot be achieved without the unique history and lived experience of a particular reader. Freire (1996) contends,

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. Reading the word is not merely preceded by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not the teacher's experience. (p. 36)

Critical literacy is one of the most important aspects of critical pedagogy. It involves reading for the recognition of power relations and reading for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2003; Kincheloe, 2008). Ira Shor (1999) argues that critical literacy is about “questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (p. 2). Critical literacy prepares students to ask critical questions about what they are reading, how the subject is being addressed, and who the author is (e.g., their story). It extends beyond the text as students learn to read the world *as a text* (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2011).

Hermeneutic Circle

One of the challenges with critically reading a text is learning to interpret in a way that maintains the integrity of what it is “saying” and allows its “aboutness” to offer insight for our current circumstances. To do this, a reader must examine the text to discern the root question the text is endeavoring to answer. In the same way, a reader must engage the whole of the hermeneutical encounter; a process which involves exploring the text, the author of the text, the historical context, and the self in relation to the text (Cosby, 2001; Crowder, 2016; Slattery, 2013). Gadamer philosophically

described the journey between the reader and the text as a *hermeneutic circle* (Crowder, 2016; Malcolm, 2018; Pokorny, 2011).

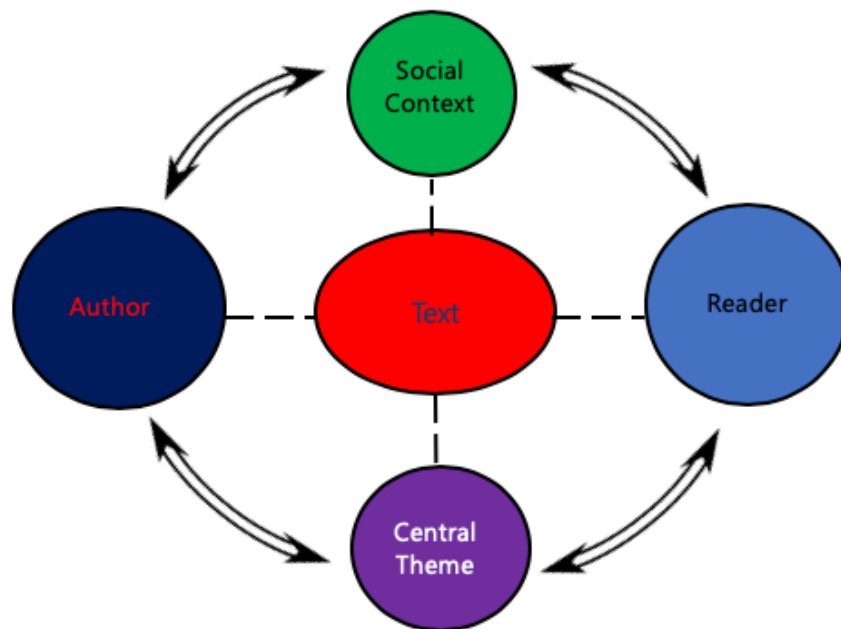
He perceived interpretation as “a form of community” where the horizon of one person becomes involved in the horizon of another person and both move toward a new horizon. To state it differently, “On [the] journey [of understanding] the world of the text and the world of the reader meet” and form something new (Pokorny, 2011, p. 101). A form of Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle is the hermeneutic quadrilateral (Crowder, 2016; Pokorny, 2011). The hermeneutic quadrilateral is a schema that illustrates the framework of the process of interpreting a text. It is a scheme that simplifies the journey between the world of the reader and the world of the text by way of inquiry.

Gadamer argued that a reader comes to the text with prejudices or preconceived notions based on their lived experiences and socialization (Byrne, 2001). It is through their preconceived notions (opinions) that a reader comprehends the content of a text. For instance, I am Oliver Thomas – with all that that entails. In part, it means I am a Protestant Christian minister, Black, American male, Ph.D. student, enrolled in a public university. How might any of these elements impact my reading of a text? How might my identity or experiences attune me or blind me to elements of a text? How will my unique struggles impact my reading of texts in which those struggles are triggered? How will my distinct desires or frustrations or hopes or disappointments impact how I listen to a text? Gadamer thought that identifying prejudices would better equip a reader to dialogue with a text because awareness of our prejudices enhances our capacity for understanding. He also maintained that knowledge is embedded in our lived experience, knowledge shapes

the ways we read (i.e., interpret), and shared knowledge (i.e., history, tradition) helps us connect with and understand the subject matter (Byrne, 2001; Schneiders, 1981; Slattery, 2013). Figure 1.2 is my visual representation of the relationship between the hermeneutic circle and the hermeneutic quadrilateral.

Figure 1.2

Representation of Relationship: Hermeneutic Circle and Hermeneutic Quadrilateral



As a condition of the hermeneutic circle, studying the historical setting(s) of a text is an important part of learning to critically read, reflect, and act on current sociopolitical realities. The quadrilateral consists of the author (how/why the text was written), the readers (past and present), the social context (era in which the text was written), and the central theme (dominant idea of the text).

Critical Exegesis

Critical engagement with a text involves asking questions that deepen a reader's understanding of the text, its author, and its relevance to present-history. It is not enough to ask, "What does the text say?" A critical reader might ask: What is the history *in* the text? What is the history *of* the text? What was the "locatedness" of the author? What question is the text trying to answer? Who were the first readers—original audience—of the text? How does the text apply to my current situation? How has the text been interpreted by others? What is my "locatedness" in relation to the text? With what lens or lenses do I read the text? A reader who approaches a text with these kinds of questions is exercising the basis of *exegesis* (Long, 2005; Malcolm, 2018; Miles, 2009). Critical exegesis, an element of the critical hermeneutical encounter, is "a process of refining questioning" so a reader can deepen their knowledge of a text (Malcolm, 2018, p. 108).

The critical hermeneutical encounter urges a reader to engage a text as if interviewing a person to learn who they are, where they come from, what they do, and how they perceive the world (Malcolm, 2018). It is a process of asking questions, listening, reflecting, responding, and asking supplementary questions to gain a deeper understanding of the *other*. It is a process of allowing the text to speak for itself while discerning its meaning. It is a process of coming to understand my "locatedness," as a reader, in relation to the text and allow myself to be *transformed* by the encounter. Thus, the goal of the critical hermeneutical encounter is a "transforming engagement of horizons" (Malcolm, 2018, p. 80).

I do not have the privilege of dialoguing with Freire and Cone, in person, but as Malcolm (2018) suggests I can *interview* them through the process of critical exegesis. My decision to use historical criticism and critical exegesis, in part, is influenced by the emphasis of cultural studies on interdisciplinary research. As a preacher, I regularly employ historical criticism and critical exegesis to read biblical as well as non-biblical texts and develop sermons. My interview of and dialogue with Cone and Freire is a hinge on which the door of possibilities opens to respond to: *What wisdom might theological education, in an academic setting, gain from a conversation between critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology?*

Critical Exegetical Research Guide

In conjunction with Charles G. Long (2005), Veronice Miles (2009), and Matthew R. Malcolm (2018), I have developed a brief exegetical outline as a guide for critically reading texts:

I. Selecting the Text

- a. Articulating the reason(s) for choosing the text
 - i. *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are primary sources

- b. Clarifying if I chose the text or if the text chose me
- c. Communicating the historical relevance of the text

II. Approaching the Text

- a. Reading the text for basic understanding
- b. Establishing the focus of my reading

- i. What am I reading for?
 - c. Placing the focus of my reading in its larger context
 - i. How does my focus relate to the author's full intent?
- III. Interviewing the Text
 - a. Who was the author?
 - i. How did the author's life influence their writing?
 - b. What was the era of the author?
 - i. How did the context of the author influence the text?
- IV. *Being Interviewed by the Text*
 - a. Who am I?
 - i. How does my life influence my reading?
 - b. What questions is the text asking me?
 - c. How am I influenced by my era?
- V. Listening to the Text
 - a. Attending to the details of the text
 - b. Asking critical questions
- VI. Exploring What I have Heard in the Text
 - a. Checking what I have heard in the commentaries
 - i. Referencing authors/communities who have engaged the text
 - ii. Commentaries may be referred to as secondary sources

VII. Conversing with and Responding to the Text

- a. Reflections and musings regarding textual discoveries
 - i. “Fusion of Horizons”
 - 1. Conversing with Cone and Freire

VIII. *Interpreting the Dialogue*

- a. Defining/describing the process of a theoretical framework taking shape in light of my conversation with Cone and Freire
 - i. *New Horizon*

The new horizon is my response to: *How might a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness, as a theoretical framework, take shape in light of the dialogue?* My goal in employing critical exegesis, historical criticism, and a research guide is to aid students in developing reading strategies that will alter their un/conscious reality.

Organization of Inquiry

Toward A Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness: Cultivating Students as Agents of Social Change is organized into five chapters. The introduction, “In Search of a Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness: Interdisciplinarity and the Process of Liberation,” focuses on framing the research, why I believe this topic is important, and why this topic is significant to Black liberation theology as well as critical pedagogy. Using critical exegetical and historical-critical methods of interpretation, I developed a guide for critically reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*. This critical reading framework entailed a

pedagogical and theological imperative which seeks to educate the reader in ways to disrupt hegemonic forces within our society, including our educational and religious institutions. Specifically, my intention was to illustrate the value of bridging Paulo Freire and James H. Cone to articulate certain democratic imperatives – namely, historical analysis, critical literacy, critical hope, and liberation.

In Chapter II, “Critical Pedagogy: A Means to Agency,” I devote attention to Freire’s seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This chapter gives a brief history of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, and his work as an educator from São Paulo, Brazil. I investigated the content/context of Freire’s writing, the content/context of his pedagogy, and the context of his lived experience as a Christian in order to: (a) critically reflect on practical and theoretical ways to teach criticality, (b) put forward ways to cultivate agency via the classroom, and (c) expand my understanding of how to equip students for public engagement. Central to my analysis was the notion of agency as a connective theme. Additionally, my examination culminated in a theological reading of Paulo Freire.

In Chapter III, “Black Liberation Theology: A Means to Liberation,” I devote attention to Cone’s pivotal work, *God of the Oppressed*. This chapter gives a brief history of Black liberation theology, James H. Cone, and his work as a theologian from Bearden, Arkansas. I examined the content/context of Cone’s writing, the content/context of his theology, and the context of his lived experience as a Christian in order to: (a) critically reflect on liberation theology through the African-American perspective, (b) gain insight into liberation as a process, and (c) deepen my knowledge of ways to equip students to participate in the process of liberation. Essential to my investigation was the notion of

liberation as a connective theme. In addition, I analyzed James Cone's pedagogical contributions to my thinking about liberation theology and the educational process.

Chapter IV, "Cultivating Agents of Social Change: A Means to the Relief of Oppression," is a synthesis of knowledge and principles gained from examining *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*. It is an interpretive analysis of definitive quotes from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*. Too, it is an imaginative dialogue between Paulo Freire, James H. Cone, and me that communicates the essence of their philosophies concerning education as the practice of freedom, theology, and the relief of oppression, by way of the teacher-student relationship. Lastly, it is a reflection on wisdom concerning Paulo Freire, James H. Cone, their faith praxis, and the social justice commitment of the critical liberative theological classroom.

In Chapter V, "Untested Futurity: Toward a Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness," I summarize my approach to examining the authors while laying a foundation for a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness. In this chapter, I reflect on the research process as I posit ways for students to: (a) ask critical questions of themselves and texts; (b) critically read texts for their pedagogical and theological implications; (c) critically reflect on individual/communal experiences of marginalization and domination; (d) expand their knowledge of various forms of oppression; and (e) form critical responses to power, privilege, and oppression. Too, I discuss how and why a pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness might illustrate present and future possibilities of critical liberative theological education, in

academic settings, by: (a) identifying benefits of employing historical criticism and the critical exegetical research guide to complete my research, (b) offering ways that a reader/researcher might amend the critical exegetical research guide, and (c) commending the application of the critical exegetical research guide and historical criticism for a critical liberative theological classroom. Finally, I complete this chapter by proclaiming my manifesto of critical liberative theological consciousness.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: A MEANS TO AGENCY

From the outset, [the revolutionary educator's] efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in men and their creative power. To achieve this, he must be a partner of the students in his relations with them. (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 62)

Freire credited his early experiences of living among very poor people and attending disadvantaged rural schools with instilling in him a profound sense of love, empathy, and compassion, as well as an understanding of how disabling conditions of poverty, reinforced by a colonizing system of education, subject subaltern students to debilitating conditions of disempowerment, domestication, and alienation. (Darder, 2018, p. 7)

Introduction

Historicizing Critical Pedagogy and Paulo Freire

Henry Giroux, critical educator and theorist, is credited with coining the phrase *critical pedagogy* in his 1983 text *Theory and Resistance in Education* (Darder et al., 2017). Yet, Paulo Freire is considered the foundational critical educator and theorist for critical pedagogy. As a social activist, Freire sought to humanize and empower learners through literacy education in São Paulo, Brazil, in the 1950s and the early 1960s. The crucial aim of his literacy education program was *conscientização* – critical consciousness. Critical consciousness encourages individuals to affect change in their communities through social critique and political action (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Freire, 1970/2003; Giroux, 2011). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire

articulated the goal of critical pedagogy, which was emancipation from oppression, particularly for the *Brazilian* poor. In the 21st century, the goal of critical pedagogy is still emancipation from oppression; however, the scope is broader.

Critical pedagogy is grounded in the educational activism of Paulo Freire and the principles of critical theory. Critical theory developed out of the work of social science theorists in Frankfurt, Germany, in the early 1900s. The work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin became known as the Frankfurt School (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical theory values economic and educational equality, social interdependence and a critical awareness of power, self-determination, and participatory democracy. Critical theory also values respect for human dignity across cultural lines of difference including age, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation (Johnson, 2014; Levinson, et al., 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Critical pedagogy and critical theory are ways of struggling with the world to make sense of and respond to inequality, pain, and oppression. Ultimately, critical theory and pedagogy are concerned with the idea of a just society in which people have cultural, economic, and political control of their lives (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008).

About *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire wrote, “From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love” (1970, p. 24). As a critical literacy educator in Brazil, Freire’s environment, his classroom, was the community. He lived among and developed kinship with poor men, women, and families. Daily, he struggled with the

community to change the environment. Hence, at the core of Freire's critical pedagogy was relationship.

It follows that relationship building, as an extension of Freire's work, is a critical element of critical pedagogy (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970/2003; Freire & Freire, 1997; hooks, 1994). More importantly, relationship building is a critical element of individual and communal liberation. We, the people, learn to live in solidarity and change our historic-present through relationships. We are held captive by relationships, and we learn to free ourselves from the tentacles of oppression through relationships. Relationships invite us to become/be compassionate, empathetic, freeing, and loving persons in a society filled with indifference, distance, various forms of slavery, and hatred. Thus, the relationship between a teacher and their students, like the relationship between Freire and members of the community, is a relational opportunity to change the sociopolitical environment.

The work of Paulo Freire, the principles of critical theory, and the critique of critical pedagogues converge at the point of the relationship between the school context and the social context in which it is embedded. The clarion call of critical pedagogy is for teachers and students to actively shape their communities in positive ways. As a critically engaged community, critical pedagogues focus on the relationship between culture, domination, ideology, and power to deconstruct barriers to democracy, freedom, and justice (Berry, 2007; Kincheloe, 2007). They share the resolve to cultivate agents of change, relieve systematic and systemic oppression, and liberate individuals and communities (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Joe Kincheloe,

Antonia Darder, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and bell hooks are a few of the theorists associated with critical pedagogy.

In order to grasp the fundamental ideas of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the relationship between Freire and critical pedagogy, it is important to understand Freire's context, lived experiences, and use of language. His lived history played a central role in his pedagogy, theology, and writing of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. His calling to relieve human suffering, liberate the oppressed, and strive toward the fullness of humanity emerged from his lived history (Darder, 2018). In the larger historical context, it is important to understand Freire's life was shaped by the damages of European colonization of indigenous people, enslavement of Africans, and colonial subjugation in Brazil. Genocide, exploitation, hunger, and malnutrition were intractable conditions of oppression that continued from the 1500s into the 1900s (Bhattacharya, 2011; Darder, 2018).

Without the backdrop of this Brazilian history, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* cannot be fully comprehended. Moreover, context is understood to have influenced Freire's sensibilities, praxis, and voice. He experienced oppressive conditions in his life and the lives of the people he served through his literacy work in the northeastern region of Brazil. To this day, the northeastern region remains one of the poorest regions of the nation, beset with the violence of poverty and racism (Darder, 2018; Soares et al., 2016). In the preface, Freire (1970) declared, "Thought and study alone did not produce *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; it is rooted in concrete situations" (p. 21).

The youngest of four children Paulo Relus Neves Freire was born in the northeastern region of Brazil on September 19, 1921 to a working-class Catholic family. At the early age of three, Freire's family began to experience economic distress after his father, Joaquin Temístocles, was forced to retire as an officer of the Pernambuco military police due to a heart condition. The change in the family's finances compelled them to move from Recife to Jaboatão dos Guararapes, a nearby small town (Darder, 2018; Leopando, 2017). Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Freire's family continued to experience economic instability which was linked to political instability. His childhood/youth was marked by political upheaval, military revolts, the Great Depression, the Revolution of 1930, and the Estado Novo dictatorship of 1937.

On October 31, 1934, Joaquin Temístocles died from a heart attack, leaving Freire's mother, Edeltrudis Veves, to take care of the family alone (Darder, 2018; Leopando, 2017). For some time, the family could not escape economic, political, and social instability, causing them to experience hunger, which had a profound effect on Freire. He wrote, "I didn't understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education. Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge" (Gadotti, 1994, p. 5). These experiences of poverty led Freire to apprehend the "culture of silence" of the oppressed. He argued that the "culture of silence" is a consequence of economic, political, and social domination (Darder, 2018, p. 6; Freire, 1970/2003). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire struggled to articulate an educational philosophy that

would transform the historic conditions of cultural, economic, educational, religious, and political injustice, alongside the oppressed.

For a reader who is unfamiliar with or new to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I want to provide a synopsis of the text. At the same time, this synopsis should not deter a reader from exploring *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for themselves. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a combination of philosophical, political, and educational theory that intersects with the suffering of the poor in Brazil. His central purpose is the creation of a world grounded in an ethics of social and material liberation. For Freire, the key to liberation is an awakening of critical awareness/consciousness in the individual and the community. He names the process of awakening *conscientização* (Freire, 1970/2003, pp. 19–20), which is a communal process of social consciousness.

In Chapter 1, Freire articulates the necessity for a “pedagogy of the oppressed,” given the realities of systemic and systematic oppression in society and its impact upon oppressed peoples. He introduces the idea of developing a critical consciousness, in the oppressed, by addressing several matters: 1) the contradiction between the oppressors and the oppressed; 2) how the contradiction is overcome; 3) and liberation as a mutual process. Through his justification of a pedagogy of the oppressed, he defines the fear of freedom, the need for the oppressed to understand their situation, the need for the oppressed to see beyond themselves, and the need for the oppressed to think about their world. For Freire, oppression is dehumanizing; therefore, “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well”

(1970/2003, p. 28). He argues that liberation is a collective struggle for the fullness of humanity.

In Chapter 2, Freire focuses on the “banking concept of education as an instrument of oppression” (1970/2003, p. 5). He defines the traditional teacher-student relationship as “banking education” wherein the teacher deposits knowledge into students who are empty vessels. In banking education, the teacher is the knower and students are passive, unknowing followers. To this end, the traditional teacher-student relationship contradicts the process of a critical awakening. Therefore, Freire proposes “problem-posing education” as a critical alternative (1970/2003, p. 66). In this model of education, the teacher and the student enter into a partnership through a dialogical and humanizing process of naming the socially constructed world.

In Chapter 3, the major focus is on “dialogics,” which is “the essence of education as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 6). Freire develops a methodology of dialogue, which is tied to an investigation of themes that are important to the lives of the Brazilian poor (e.g., students). The themes generate objects of study that serve as the focus of the teacher-student/student-teacher dialogues. He links dialogical praxis to the development of critical awareness/consciousness, politics, and the cultivation of revolutionary leaders among the oppressed.

And, in Chapter 4, Freire compares “antidialogics and dialogics as matrices of opposing theories of cultural action” (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 6). Antidialogics he defines as an instrument of oppression. Dialogics he defines as an instrument of liberation. He outlines four characteristics of antidialogical action. The characteristics are: conquest,

divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion. Likewise, he outlines four characteristics of dialogical action. The characteristics are: cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis. Dialogical action, as he defines it, is enacted through a pedagogical and political commitment to the cause of liberation for the oppressed. Antidialogical action is enacted through a pedagogical and political commitment to oppression. Thus, a pedagogy of the oppressed, as Freire synthesizes it in Chapter 4, is a pedagogy of cultural/revolutionary action that must be performed by the people (e.g., teachers, students) for change and social transformation.

Critical pedagogy continues Freire's educational approach to the situation of oppression through "transforming action" that "makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (Freire, 1970, pp. 31–32). As a community, critical pedagogues are acting to change the world by imagining a social order where young people have a voice in the public square, women receive equal wages for equal work, and voters are not denied the opportunity to engage the electoral process. A student who is taught to question, understand, and critically respond to the socially constructed world will also learn to participate in the process of democratization. According to Freire (1970), students learn to transform their societies through emancipatory education. He employed a problem-posing methodology to teach students to think critically and develop critical consciousness. His objectives were for students to question the economic, political, and social issues in their lives and to act against the oppression they experienced daily (Akom, 2009; Freire, 1970/2003). As an expansion of Freire's teaching method, critical pedagogy identifies teachers as problem posers. Therefore, the role of the critical

pedagogue is to assist students with developing a political and social awareness of the world in which they live (Brock, 2010); provide tools for understanding the dynamics of injustice, oppression, and power (Macedo, 2007); and cultivate students as agents of social change.

In the classroom, critical pedagogy calls on students to engage in the learning process through listening, self-reflection, and dialogue, which are central to education as an open and evolving process (Giroux, 2007; Hill-Collins, 2009). As a “humanizing pedagogy,” it seeks to open a space where students come face to face with their individual and collective power to be critical thinkers and critical responders (Macedo, 2007, p. 394; Giroux, 2007). To be a critical thinker and responder, a student cannot be a passive recipient of the teacher’s knowledge. However, in traditional education, teachers are viewed as pillars of knowledge and students are viewed as empty vessels. This educational practice is a contradiction which operates against humanization and liberation, according to Freire. Consequently, the process of conscientização calls for an analysis of and solution to the “teacher-student contradiction” (Freire, 1970, p. 59) so that education becomes an exercise of freedom. Without critical reflection on and transformation of educational methods, inside and outside of the classroom, education will be an exercise of domination.

The teacher-student relationship is a critical element in the liberatory process of cultivating students as agents of societal change. In part, students learn to trust their power to learn, their knowledge (lived history), and their ability to construct knowledge through the educational practices of their teacher(s). Students may be encouraged,

discouraged, or silenced by their experiences which could affect their sense of agency. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) critiqued the traditional model of education as he analyzed the traditional teacher-student relationship, the teacher-student contradiction. He coined the phrase *banking model of education* as a metaphor for the traditional model because it is akin to depositing money in a bank. Likewise, he reasoned that the teacher-student contradiction denies the abilities and possibilities of students because it hinges on the assumption that the teacher is the giver of knowledge. The teacher deposits knowledge into students, and students receive the knowledge without question. The teacher is the thinker, and the students are not. The teacher develops the curriculum, and students follow the curriculum as directed. In the *banking model of education*, students are socialized as passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge, deterred from trusting their power to learn, denied the opportunity to share their knowledge, and inhibited from acting in ways which confront their historic reality (i.e., the improvement of society). A teacher who unknowingly or knowingly functions in the role as the giver of knowledge is detached from the struggle for agency, liberation, and humanization.

In the banking model of education, students are regarded as objects (programmable robots) rather than subjects (conscious beings). They are socialized to believe that authority, knowledge, and power are held by the teacher. Conversely, critical pedagogues teach students to take ownership of their learning and participate in the construction of knowledge using Freire's *problem-posing model*; a model that "strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (1970, p. 68). Joldersma (1999) critiques the banking model of education as *dehumanizing* because it

creates oppressive passivity in students, mirroring the structure of an oppressive society. Beyond the classroom, student-citizens, shaped by the teacher-student/object-subject contradiction, come to believe that they *are not* subjects with the ability to act in the world, rather they *are* objects acted upon by leaders (and systems) with authority and power. Critical pedagogy rejects the banking model of education because it perpetuates injustice and oppression, maintaining the existing social order by working against liberation (Akom, 2009; Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Freire, 1970/2003; Giroux, 2007; Joldersma, 1999; Kincheloe, 2008). Giroux (2011) suggests that education should cultivate students as critically thinking citizens who take up their responsibility in “democratic public life” (p. 71).

The *Declaration of Independence* reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The social justice work of critical pedagogy is grounded in the idea that “all are created equal,” not simply White men of an elite class (Shields, 2012, p. 12). As educators, critical pedagogues work toward equity and equality in local and global communities. “All are created equal” is more than a mere phrase. These words give meaning to the work of (re)shaping and (re)imagining the relations among individuals, communities, and society-at-large. Critical pedagogues are responding to present realities such as poverty, religious intolerance, and sexism with knowledge of the past to (re)shape the present and future social world (Freire, 2013; Kincheloe, 2007; Steinberg, 2007). It also calls on teachers as well as students to live; “all are created equal” by endeavoring to relieve

systematic and systemic oppression in naming societal injustices, critiquing social stratification, and transforming society through praxis (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Freire, 1970/2003; Shields, 2012).

Freire's lived history of attending disadvantaged rural schools, being hungry, and living with the poor, in poverty, implanted in him a spirit of compassion, empathy, and love for people, as well as an understanding of how inequity and inequality is perpetuated through a colonizing system of education (Darder, 2018; Leopando, 2017). If not for his mother, the world may not have known Paulo Freire as an educational philosopher, critical pedagogue, and liberation theologian. She was determined he would be well educated despite the family's financial hardships. As a result, she persuaded the principal of an elite private high school, "Colégio Oswaldo Cruz," in Recife to admit Paulo as a scholarship student. At Colégio Oswald Cruz, Freire was considered "fairly intelligent for an adolescent from the impoverished outskirts of the city" (Darder, 2018, p. 7). As a high school student, he became a grammar teacher at Colégio Oswaldo Cruz. It was there that Freire's pedagogical approach, which centers students' lives, students' educational needs, and dialogue with/among students began to emerge (Darder, 2018; Leopando, 2017).

Critical pedagogues invite students to reflect on their lived history, name the systems of inequity and inequality that encompass their lives, and discuss critical ways to transform unjust individual/communal conditions. We, individuals as well as social groups, make meaning of our lives, our communities and the world in which we live through experience. We cannot move out from - get outside of - lived experience, which shapes and (re)shapes our world. Lived history, then, becomes the platform for inquiring

about our social world and the intersection of our individual/communal lives in it. By inviting students to question their lived experiences, as well as question the socially constructed world, students have an opportunity to uncover the power relations that both oppress and privilege. Guiding student-citizens through a problem-posing process, which engages their historic reality, teaches them to analyze the world in which we live. Equally, it teaches student-citizens just how systems oppress and privilege social groups, differently (Berry, 2007; Denzin, 2007; Kincheloe, 2008; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Through this critical educational process, student-citizens might offer new possibilities for changing systems of oppression. This was the hope of Paulo Freire and the desire of critical pedagogy.

Critical education is designed to engage lived histories, students, teachers, and texts in ways that challenge, question, resist, and subvert systems of inequality. Unlike the banking model of education, which is fixed and unidirectional, the critical, problem-posing, dialogical model of education is in a state of flux because it is responding to the complexity of social realities. It is so because “problem-posing education affirms men as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). In the same way, a critical liberative theological classroom would be alive in a “state of becoming” because relationships between teachers and students, students and communities, communities and individuals are complex (Macedo, 2007). The possibilities and limits of critical pedagogy are shaped and (re)shaped by the *living* classroom (Denzin, 2007). It implies constantly learning, unlearning, thinking, and (re)thinking the socializing effects of schooling - inside and

outside of the classroom. As a result, I understand promoting agency, liberation, and the relief of oppression as central to the transformative work of critical pedagogy. Equally, I recognize these themes as being shared with the social justice work of Black liberation theology.

Freire's Pedagogical Praxis

Critical emancipatory education plays an important role in empowering individuals as well as communities. It provides individuals with the tools to disrupt systems of oppression with their questions, their speech, and their actions. Education that is social justice-oriented offers ways to foster community among individuals to thoughtfully address classism, racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression. To foster critical ways of addressing systems of oppression via the classroom, I begin with the assumption that the classroom is a microcosm of society. In the “small world” that is the classroom, students learn to connect the *content* of the course with the *context* in which they live. Student-citizens who connect the context in which they live with the content of the course are positioned to address *-isms* in the public square. Svi Shapiro, critical pedagogue and author of *Losing Heart: The Moral and Spiritual Miseducation of America's Children*, emphasizes a central task of the critical educator. He writes, a critical educator “is to light the candle of possibility: a possibility not removed from the reality of people's lives but found right there among the clutter and mishmash of our daily experiences” by challenging belief systems and ways of knowing (2006, p. 63). Hence, as agents of social change, critical educators light the way for students to

participate in their emancipation and the emancipation of our communities (Freire, 1970/2003; Shapiro, 2006).

Changing the structure of our oppressive society is linked to the transformation of our day-to-day lives. Teachers and students cannot separate themselves from the world in which we live and the classroom in which we learn. We are positioned between two worlds such that our actions influence both (Giroux, 2011). How teachers and students learn to ask critical questions of themselves and others, in the classroom, influences the ways they act toward others in society. If a student is unwilling to critically examine the ways they are socialized by and participate in systems of power, privilege, and oppression, then, in the public square, their actions may result in the denial of the unalienable rights of all. Freire (1970) identified two major stages in his pedagogy of the oppressed that might transform our day-to-day lives and change our oppressive society. He wrote,

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation. (p. 40)

In the first stage, students confront their knowledge of the world, their perception of the world, their actions, and their beliefs. In the second stage, students begin to dispel the myths that shape their thinking and their actions. An important element of this liberatory process is the idea of the teacher as a partner with students (Freire, 1970/2003). As a partner, the teacher exchanges the “role of depositor” for the “role of student among

students” (Darder, 2018, p. 114) and experiences the stages of transformation with their students.

A teacher-student partnership dismantles the teacher-student contradiction by undoing an “authoritarianism and alienating intellectualism” (Freire, 1970, p. 74). With the undoing of the contradiction, teachers and students are encouraged to name the unjust structures which shape their relationship and “obstruct their consciousness as free *beings for themselves*” (Darder, 2018, p. 114). Students and teachers begin to emerge as “subjects of history,” through praxis – reflection, naming the world, and action, giving rise to a new awareness and emerging consciousness, able to transform oppressive situations (Darder, 2018, p. 115). Freire wrote,

Revolutionary praxis cannot tolerate an absurd dichotomy in which the praxis of the people is merely that of following the leaders’ decision...the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as Subjects of the transformation. (pp. 120–121)

Critical pedagogical praxis has the potential to generate thoughtful, positive change in students and our communities because it charges us with naming the world in order to act in ways that transform oppressive realities.

“With a dialogical enactment of praxis, a problem-posing pedagogy creates the space, place, and time for teachers and students to discover and rethink together the social and material contradictions that impact their world” (Darder, 2018, p. 115). In the critical liberatory classroom, students are invited to connect their lived history with the social world through dialogue. “Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 76). Stated differently, dialogue permits

students and teachers to name and (re)name their story while increasing their understanding of their experiences within the social world (Denzin, 2007). When students and teachers reflect on their lived experiences and question their ways of knowing, belief systems are challenged. As a result, dialogue generates conflict. Conflict awakens students to different ways of acting and knowing, which can lead to transformation. Without dialogue and conflict, agency is not possible.

Critical education embraces conflict as an uneasiness that dislodges students from their unquestioned beliefs because it encourages critical consciousness (Darder et al., 2017; Freire, 1970/2003; Freire, 2013; Kincheloe, 2008). Students experience conflict with their teacher, their classmates, themselves, and the world because they are struggling against the consciousness imposed by a banking model of education. For Freire (1970), critical consciousness is a process which problem-posing pedagogy embrace. Conflict, therefore, should not be avoided because it urges students to participate in democratization by gaining a deeper understanding of their social identities, the social identities of others, and the effects of social realities. By linking their lived history with the lived history of others, students might learn to act as responsible, critically engaged citizens (Giroux, 2011). Freire reaffirms, “A deepened consciousness of [our] situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible to transformation” (as cited in Darder, 2018, p. 116). Students become aware of their potential to affect the community and become/be agents of social change – individually/collectively.

In truth, lighting the candle of possibility and acting toward the liberation of our communities, and ourselves as individuals, is a perpetual struggle. The news commonly reports classist, racist, sexist, and xenophobic incidents as isolated occurrences disconnected from U.S. history and culture. People of color, women, youth, and other marginalized persons experience macro and micro-aggressions daily. Women are assaulted by “cat-calls” on the street, in restaurants, and on social media platforms. Youth are accosted and arrested at shopping centers because they are not accompanied by an adult. Blackness is a crime punishable by legal and illegal means. Documented and undocumented immigrants live with the fear of being taken from their homes and separated from their families. Amid so many injustices, how do students and teachers affirm their agency? This is a question that must be asked if we, students and teachers, desire to positively change our environments. We must act in/upon our environment to be/become agents of social change.

Freire (1970) defines agency as “independent self-consciousness” (pp. 20–21). Kincheloe (2008) defines agency as “a person’s ability to shape and control his or her own life by freeing the self from the oppression of power” (p. 42). In the case of marginalized people, the suppression of our independent self-consciousness and the overwhelming reality of systematic oppression induces feelings of powerlessness, negatively influencing the struggle for freedom and agency (Darder et al., 2017). Equally, the thought of combating the economic, political, and social power of dominant groups produces angst and hopelessness. Yet, there are various ways to free the self from the oppression of power.

Power is at work in individuals, relationships, and knowledge construction. Individuals can free themselves through their actions because power is at work in the body. As conduits of power, individuals can express power on local and global scales (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). For example, I can alter power relations by altering my relationships with individuals, communities, and systems. To alter a relationship is an act of resistance. If, as a marginalized person, I alter a relationship locally, then I can learn to resist domination globally (or systematically). So, in the critical liberative theological classroom, the goals would be to teach students to acknowledge their agency, grasp relational power, and encourage community engagement. In this way, they might develop habits of resisting oppression as individuals and as a group because power would not be perceived as a static, unidirectional entity forced on the marginalized by the dominant (Darder et al., 2017).

Freire's Liberation Theology

Encouraging community engagement, grasping relational power, and developing agency is a process akin to a religious experience. Freire used the terms conversion, communion, and rebirth to articulate the process of converting from “oppressed” to “new man” through the pedagogy of the oppressed. “Men” and “new man” are terms Freire used in the 1960s, which were indicative of the era. However, his use of language was not meant to include men to the exclusion of women and other marginalized persons (Darder, 2018; Freire, 1998; hooks, 2010). A different way of communicating Freire’s idea is to say that through the pedagogy of the oppressed there is potential to transition from an old way of being to a new way of being.

As the oppressed, in the old way of being, people lived in the image of and according to the will of the oppressors. As people in the process of *conscientização*, the new way of being, we develop a critical awareness of our own consciousness and live in the permanent process of liberation (Freire, 1970/2003). As people who experience the violence of oppression, the goal is not to become free of oppression in order to oppress the oppressors (and ourselves); rather, it is to experience a new way of being human, altogether. He wrote, “Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were” (1970, p. 47).

Freire’s idea of conversion from an old way of being to a new way of being is profoundly theological and Christian. In 2 Corinthians 5, verses 17 and 18, the text reads,

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (NRSV)

The ministry of reconciliation is the bringing together of persons whose relationship is alienated and broken (McKim, 1996). Christian theology asserts that Jesus Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection, was reconciling alienated relationships - God and God’s people, God’s people with one another. In the same way, Christ called followers to experience a rebirth (be born again) and become/be ministers of reconciliation in their communities. In Christ, the ministry of reconciliation is not denying the realities of oppression and the injustices caused by systems of oppression. It is being truthful about the brokenness created by systems of oppression (confession),

understanding that broken relationships do not have to remain broken (repentance/forgiveness), and realizing that inequities in relationships (e.g., individual, communal, societal) can be transformed (restitution). Concretely, the new creation is living into the image of Jesus Christ, who lived among, communed with, served, struggled to liberate, and loved people.

In an interview with Ana Maria Araújo Freire, Antonia Darder, Leavey Presidential Endowed Chair & Professor in Ethics and Moral Leadership at Loyola Marymount University and author of *The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, asked, "Who were the intellectuals that influenced Paulo's ideas in Pedagogy of the Oppressed?" (2018, p. 157) Ana Maria Araújo Freire reiterated that Freire's early experiences of poverty were the greatest influence on his ideas. He was not provoked to write the text because of well-known authors. It was the suffering he lived and experienced with oppressed people, as it concerned the injustices of Brazilian society, that drove his desire to change the world. It was the moment he began to think and say, "Only my ideas, my realization, my Christian spirit, my seeing in every oppressed person the semblance of Christ, that can lead me to understand and to find possibilities for changing the conditions of the oppressed" (Freire as cited by Ana Maria in Darder, 2018, p. 158). That is, then, when he began to experience his conversion.

Converting to the "cause of liberation" is a process which includes communing with the oppressed, trusting the oppressed's ability to reason, reflecting with the oppressed, and acting with the oppressed so that all might experience a rebirth (Freire, 1970, p. 47). Conversion is not a single experience but an ongoing process of developing

critical consciousness and agency. The cause of liberation is an “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (p. 52), which is an act of love, achievable by the oppressed and the oppressors. However, the oppressors are not the ones to lead the cause of liberation because of their role in the history of oppression and violence. Freire wrote,

Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up in it – oppressors and oppressed alike. Both are submerged in this situation, and both bear the marks of oppression. Analysis of existential situations of oppression reveals that their inception lay in an act of violence – initiated by those with power. This violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate. (p. 44)

As the oppressed have been conditioned by subjugation, thinking their oppression is fatal, so the oppressors have been conditioned to maintain their power over the oppressed. On the one hand, the oppressed experience their social realities as unchangeable, as the will of God. On the other hand, the oppressors experience their social realities as god-like, maintaining their power through mythologized ideology. In either instance, according to Freire (1970), these are “distorted views of God,” “God is not the creator of this organized disorder,” and oppression, as an act of subjugation, is perpetrated by people who do not love (p. 48). So, then, conversion is not only a transition from “oppressed” to “new man;” it is a transition from lovelessness to love.

Again, Freire’s idea of conversion in relation to love is deeply theological and Christian. Jesus imparted several teachings pertaining to love of self, neighbor, and God during the course of his ministry. In one instance, he taught, “And you shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And... you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29–31). In a different instance, he taught, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). In a further instance, he taught,

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love...No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you [love]. (John 15:10, 12–14)

In all, Jesus’ teachings were foundational to Freire’s response to violence and oppression (Darder, 2018; Leopando, 2017). In like manner, Jesus’ teachings shaped Freire’s pedagogical and theological praxis. He argued that an act of love may originate in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors and the poverty of their oppression. He was certain that responding to violence and oppression is a calling to love that the oppressed must see themselves participating in (Freire, 1970/2003).

Since God did not create “organized disorder,” (i.e., systems of oppression), then to love is an act of resistance, which has individual, communal, and social implications. To love is to claim/reclaim my humanity, the humanity of my neighbors, and all of creation from a situation of violence and oppression. In so doing, Freire’s liberation theology demands that the oppressed confront political, economic, religious, and social structures that dehumanize, disenfranchise, and marginalize innumerable masses in our neighborhoods and beyond (Leopando, 2017). In this way, conversion, for the oppressed, is two-fold: (a) discovering the internalization of the image of the oppressor and (b) uncovering our consciousness. In the first stage, the oppressed learn that their way of life

and behaviors are shaped by a long history of violence initiated by those in power. In the second stage, the oppressed learn to reflect on their concrete situation. And, in the process of reflecting, the oppressed learn to act. “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation,” wrote Freire (1970), “that they begin to believe in themselves” and their power to change (p. 52).

Although Freire argues the oppressors cannot lead the cause of liberation, he does not negate the possibility of conversion to the cause of dismantling systems of oppression. It is through communion with the oppressed that the oppressors experience their conversion. Central to the idea of communion, in the Christian tradition, is the union of individuals around a set of beliefs or a common fellowship (McKim, 1996). In the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, communion led to the sharing of life and property. It also altered communal living in ways that led to forms of Christian socialism in the 1st century and the 20th century; hence, Freire’s theological perspective on the relational possibilities among the oppressed and the oppressors. By way of communion, oppressors discover their internalized image of superiority, uncover their critical awareness through their trust in the oppressed, and struggle alongside the oppressed. Oppressors who desire to convert to the cause of liberation must share their lives with the oppressed, “re-examine themselves constantly,” and “take on a new form of existence” (Freire, 1970, p. 47). To experience rebirth, they must gain a critical awareness of the distinct ways their lives reflect systems of domination. They can no longer live the old

way - imposing their position/power, maintaining control, distrusting the people, and act without being in dialogue.

Converting to the cause of liberation is critical for our society, and I submit that we should take-up the cause of liberation in the critical liberative theological classroom. The transition from an old way of being to a new way of being is achievable. In the microcosm of society (the theological classroom), the teacher can transition from an authoritarian, knowledge granting role to a dialogical partnership with students. The students can transition from passive recipients of the teacher's authority and knowledge to an active participant in the learning and knowledge creation process. In communion with each other, the students and the teacher uncover the ways they have been conditioned by systems of oppression. Equally, they uncover the ways they commit violence against themselves and others. They begin to grasp relational power and discover their power to change. As they engage the classroom as community, they experience their subjectivity and learn to love one another toward the fullness of all. In short, students and teachers, constructing a critical theological consciousness, may experience conversion, rebirth, if they commune with one another, trust one another, reflect with one another, and act with one another.

Interpreting Freire's Pedagogical Praxis, Theology, and the Process of Liberation

We—teacher and student, oppressed and oppressor—are conditioned by systems of inequality, discrimination, and dehumanization. The dispiritedness and hopelessness felt by individuals experiencing unjust circumstances is symptomatic of collective realities. The bondage experienced in our society and our communities is interconnected

with the bondage experienced by individuals. The freedom of an individual is intertwined with the freedom of the community. Thus, the cause of liberation is laboriously entangled with the agency (or lack thereof) of individuals and communities.

Sadly, we are encumbered by the United States' culture of individualism. The ideology of individualism teaches that the individual person and their interests are more important than *the other*. It teaches that it is suitable to value the individual self above the welfare of the community. It is a barrier which makes it harder for students to listen to and connect with the lived experiences of other students, especially students who do not act like or look like them. In truth, individualism is a form of bondage which inhibits agency. The ideology of individualism conflicts with the liberatory theme of pedagogy of the oppressed and critical pedagogy because it isolates people from one another, and it incites a sense of indifference toward suffering. In *Critical Pedagogy*, Joe L. Kincheloe, founder of The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy, writes,

To *be* in the world is to be in relationship. People are not abstract individuals who live as fragments, in isolation from one another. Humans come to be who they are and change who they are as a result of their interrelationships, their connections to the social sphere. They learn to think and talk via the socially constructed languages, deport themselves via cultural norms in their communities, and take care of themselves by imitating significant others in their immediate environment. Race, class, gender, sexual, religious, geographical place affiliations exert powerful influences on how they see themselves and their relation to the world. To be human is to be in relation to. And, importantly...to be human is to possess the power to change, to be better, to be smarter, to become a transformative agent. (2008, p. 175)

Individualism, like classism, racism, sexism, and other isms, is a form of bondage that hinders our capacity to live *freely*. Dominant groups “do not perceive their monopoly

on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves” (Freire, 1970, p. 41). Undoubtedly, marginalized groups suffer the emotional, physical, and mental chains of bondage more readily, but we are not free. I am signifying human beings when I use *we*. We are not free because we knowingly and unknowingly reinscribe our bondage through individual and communal relationships. To put it simply, we socially construct our bondage. And so, since we socially construct our bondage through our relationships, it is possible and necessary to reconstruct our relationships for freedom (Freire, 1970/2003; Freire & Freire, 1997; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008).

Freire (1970) defined liberation as “a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 52). The environments in which we act can be our home, our classroom, our church, or our community-at-large. In other words, our environments are worlds within *the world*. As I perceive it, liberation is a process of continually freeing ourselves from individual and communal bondage as we act in/upon our environment. Although the process of liberation is not limited to an “official” classroom, for the current research, the critical liberative theological classroom is an important site for reimagining relations of power, developing critical consciousness, and acting toward liberation in the public square.

Teaching Criticality: A Process of Transformation

The liberatory practice of education labors to understand social systems, disrupt systems of oppression, and create an environment for thinking and acting *freely* (Freire, 1970/2003; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 2010). Combating a narrative of fear and hatred perpetuated by the media, politicians, and corporations is an epic undertaking. In a

cultural, political, religious, and social atmosphere of anxiety, terror, and hostility, answering the question – *can we reinvent and reimagine our laws in ways that express a critical pedagogy of hope, liberation, and love?* – is not an easy *yes* (Denzin, 2007). Critical pedagogy beckons teachers to engage their students, their knowledge, their lived experiences, and their own lived experiences to (re)construct social relations – teacher/student, individual/community, oppressor/oppressed (Bettez, 2011; Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970/2003; hooks, 1994).

I consider the critical liberative theological classroom to be an incubator where students and teachers learn to thoughtfully participate in critical emancipation. Transforming inequitable societal conditions through communal engagement (Cannella & Lincoln, 2012) is counter-cultural, and it presents a major challenge for critical educators because social transformation requires social responsibility (Peterson, 2017). In hindsight, I acknowledge I did not build relationships with the students in the “Introduction to Ethics” course. Honestly, I did not think I needed to build relationships with the students. I thought it was important to be collegial, but I did not think critically about the correlation between relationship building, power, justice, and liberation. Furthermore, I did not incorporate relationship building into the course curriculum because I was not intentional about building relationships. As I reflect, I recognize that teaching in intentional and thoughtful ways invites students to imagine a different world and a different social order (Johnson, 2014). Teaching is “not a job like any other job, but a crucial site of struggle” (Giroux, 2011, p. 160). It is a path to “facilitate human emancipation and equity” (Levinson, 2011, p. 3). Partnering with students, in the critical

emancipatory process, is a way of being and doing that pronounces change, as we act in/upon our environment.

We resist systems of oppression and act toward the relief of oppression when we participate in changing the social order. Critical educational practices such as identifying systems of oppression and privilege, self-reflection, active listening, and relationship building provide the conditions for students to flourish as critical, creative thinkers able to imagine transformed social relations (Freire, 2013; hooks, 2010). As a teacher, my freedom is connected to the freedom of students and the community-at-large. For these reasons, as I perceive it, critical educators are called to engage students in a democratic process that improves their lives and the lives of others (Giroux, 2011; Peterson, 2017). Thus, the critical liberative theological classroom becomes an incubator for transforming the world when teachers and students act as if the classroom is a democracy and take seriously their social responsibility for one another.

As students engage the classroom, they are invited to critically analyze their beliefs and the systems that shape their way of thinking about the world. And they are not alone in the process. For every activity in which students participate, I too participate. The “liberatory practice of education” involves the teacher as learner, listener, and actor (Darder, 2002, p. 92). We, students and teacher, co-labor to bridge our lived experiences, ways of understanding, and course materials (i.e., activities, texts) (hooks, 1994). We grow in our knowledge, we experience change in our relationships, we affirm our agency, and we learn to act in/upon our community through a critical liberatory process of education. Gradually, we are encouraged to live ethically just lives, as active members of

the community (Steinberg, 2012), as matters of injustice are taken up with the idea of affecting change.

According to Kincheloe (2007), critical pedagogy is concerned with transforming relations of power, which are oppressive and which lead to the oppression of people. When I taught “Introduction to Ethics” I did not consider the ways power functions in the classroom or its correlation with students’ agency. Likewise, I did not reflect on power at work in knowledge construction and relationships. If I had the opportunity to re-teach the course, I would take a different approach. First, I would not assume that students do not have a working knowledge of ethics. I would begin the course by inviting students to share their experiences of ethical and unethical situations. And I would ask students to reflect on the ways their experiences shape their understanding of ethics. Second, I would include an activity where we would write a code of ethics. Collectively, we would determine how we might be respectful of one another in our speech, be responsible for one another in our actions, and learn from one another as a community, for example. Third, I would assign a project where, as a group, students would choose a community issue to address. Their project might be adopting a classroom in a low-income school, interviewing individuals protesting police violence, or inviting local pastors to visit the classroom. In so doing, students would be acting in/upon their environment, practicing their social responsibility, as they write, discuss, and critically reflect on these activities.

Freedom, as Freire (1970) defined it, is “the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (p. 31). In the quest for human completion, teachers and students participate in the restoration and rebuilding of our humanity through praxis (Brock, 2010;

Freire, 1970; hooks, 2010). Restoring the fullness of all is the foundation of the critical educational process. Internal-reflection (self-reflection) and external-reflection (reflection-with-community) are significant pieces of the process to relieve oppression. Liberating the community-at-large is an individual as well as a collective effort.

Becoming/Being Student-Citizens: Engaging the Public Square

Silvia C. Bettez, associate professor in the Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Department at UNCG, has helped me reflect on the power of relationship/community building in the classroom. In her course, ELC685: Passionate Pedagogies, I observed Dr. Bettez's attention to relationship building through directed activities. With the activities, she invited students to actively listen, connect with diverse lived experiences, and collaborate on a project of social interest. The course description for ELC685: Passionate Pedagogies reads, "In this course, we will study how passion, on the part of both teachers and learners, can become a motivating force for deeper understanding of ourselves and critical social issues in society" (Bettez, 2016). It is important to note that passion necessitates a relationship with/to a subject. A subject can be a person, a student, the community, or an idea like social justice (Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008). In Passionate Pedagogies, I felt the passion of my colleagues and Dr. Bettez. I witnessed the movement from individual lived experiences to communal experiences, from individual concerns to shared concerns, from timid responses to passionate exchanges about social justice.

In the critical liberative theological classroom, there are a couple of activities of Dr. Bettez's that I would employ or modify. First, I would begin the course by inviting

students to share their story, incorporating their theology, through visual imagery. In *Passionate Pedagogies*, Dr. Bettez invited us to share our story by creating a collage. As opposed to introducing ourselves with the usual name, place of birth, and major, we had the opportunity to move beneath the surface of general exchange. The sharing of stories through visual imagery caused us to listen and connect with one another on a deeper level. For example, one colleague shared that they were a diabetic. As we listened to them and shared our own experiences with family members who live with diabetes, we connected as relational beings. In that moment, the community became aware of our need to be attentive to (responsible for) our classmate should their glucose level rise or fall. A similar activity in the critical liberative theological classroom would invite students to build relationships of trust through story.

Second, I would invite students to form groups of two or three. The purpose of the groups would be for students to share and reflect on their stories throughout the semester. In these small groups, students would share the various ways their individual and collective stories are being affected by in-class discussions, questions, course readings, and self-reflection. At the end of the course, students would have the option of writing about their educational experience or creating a piece of art (i.e., collage, dance, drawing, painting, poem). The piece would express their encounter with new knowledge, individual/collective storytelling, relationship building, and changes in their worldview (if any). In *Passionate Pedagogies*, we were tasked with writing reflective essays and a learning/teaching narrative. We were asked to reflect on our histories as students and teachers (self-reflect), consider the thoughts of our classmates (in-class discussion),

incorporate ideas from course readings (new knowledge), and describe our philosophical/spiritual/political changes (if any). The educational process gave us an opportunity to encounter the world through diverse lenses, critically reflect on our own perspectives, and think with critical educators about liberatory ways to respond to social issues (Bettez, 2016; Darder et al., 2017; Freire, 1970;2003; Peterson, 2017). Students in a critical liberative theological classroom would benefit from a similar experience because it would provide tools for participating in the public square.

Conclusion

The process of critical education is a striving toward freedom. It is a struggle for freedom because the oppressed and the oppressor have been conditioned by the historical, political, and social reality of domination, injustice, and power (Freire, 1970/2003; Freire, 2013; Levinson, et al., 2011). Developing a critical awareness of the causes of oppression is the first step in the process of transformation. Reflecting on individual and collective responsibilities within systems of oppression is the second step in the process of transformation. And responding to oppression through public engagement is the third step in the process of transformation. But, the historical, political, religious, and social conditioning of the oppressed and the oppressors are such that transformation *is not a linear* pathway to freedom (Brock, 2010; Cannella & Lincoln, 2012; Freire, 1970/2003; Giroux, 2011; Hill-Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008). The quest for human completion, then, is an ongoing, incomplete process for several reasons: (a) there are multiple forms of oppression; (b) the power of dominant groups is culturally, economically, politically, religiously, and socially influential; (c) the collective voice of

the marginalized is often silenced by means of violence; and (d) the relief of oppression is a fight comprising the individual and their lived experiences, the individual and the community, the community and society, dehumanization, and humanization. The critical liberative theological classroom is an incubator for this critical transformative process because it is a space for actualizing freedom.

Agency is a process that strives for the fullness of humanity. Per the environment, agency will take different forms. In an “Introduction to Ethics” course, it may take the form of students collectively developing a code of ethics and applying that code of ethics to their individual lives. In a gated community, it may take the form of neighbors organizing community forums to dialogue about racial profiling. In a church, it may take the form of clergy beginning a conversation on sexual harassment and sexism. Whether the cause of liberation is enacted in the classroom or the home or the community, it is a quest for the rebuilding and restoration of all.

CHAPTER III

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY: A MEANS TO LIBERATION

The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday. The order is significant. I am *black* first – and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God. I believe that the Bible is a liberating word for many people but not the *only* word of liberation. God speaks not just one Word in only one Story but many liberating words in many sacred stories. (Cone, 1997, p. xi)

Since its inception, the academic study of religion and theology in America has been the domain of white men. The sources and norms of theological study were drawn from their experience and largely served to reinforce the misnomer that objective inquiry and universal truth could only be achieved by answering the questions posed by white male subjectivity. (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 2)

Introduction

Historicizing Black Liberation Theology and James H. Cone

A Black theology of liberation, as a social analysis and critique of life in the United States, has existed, in some form, since the era of slavery. Slavery, as an institution, was central to the cultural, economic, political, and social construction of the United States. In a social context conditioned by the buying, selling, and trading of bodies, enslaved as well as free people were formed by the notion that certain bodies were non-human or less-than-human. Black bodies were bought, sold, and traded alongside cattle, horses, and other livestock. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, and Henry McNeal Turner are examples of liberationists who possessed a different understanding of Black existence and who perceived that God was

on the side of the subjugated, as they responded to the oppression of Negro people in the 19th century and the early 20th century. To this end, Henry McNeal Turner – minister and politician - declared “God is a Negro” as he sought to empower Negroes during the post-civil war era and confront the belief by many Black and White Christians alike that God “is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented white man” (Angell, 1992, p. 253, p. 261).

The oppression of Negro people, in the United States, did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil War Amendments (13th, 14th, 15th), or the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1871. With the enactment of Jim Crow laws toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Negro/Black people continued to experience socio-political silencing and subjugation. During the subsequent years of Jim Crow laws, in the 20th century, individuals such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Benjamin E. Mays, and Howard Thurman sustained the struggle for freedom as well as the social analysis and critique of life in North America. In his text, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949/1976), Thurman interpreted the teachings of Jesus, through the experience of the oppressed, for a “liberating spirituality” that joined “personal and societal transformation” (p. viii). As a way of confronting White supremacist ideologies and the effects of domination, while offering possibilities for thriving and surviving, Black theologians and liberationists have been critiquing American society, struggling for social justice, and charting paths to freedom, all through the social-political history of the United States.

In the mid-1960s, amidst the political and social struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, through the work of Black scholars and progressive pastors continuing the struggle for social justice and freedom, a Black theology of liberation began to take form as an academic discipline (McMickle, 2018). Despite major successes including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black people continued to be treated as *less than* human, ostracized within American society. For example, Black people experienced “redlining” which was a practice of denying services or increasing the cost of services such as health care, insurance, and banking based on the color of their skin (Zenou & Boccard, 2000). Simultaneously, activists, leaders, and bystanders such as Medgar Evers, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Henry Hezekiah Dee, and Charles Eddie Moore were murdered by White supremacists (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2019). As a result of these triumphs and tragedies, Black academics and ministers sought to articulate the “religious nature and meaning of social transformation” for Blacks in the United States (Cannon & Pinn, 2014, p. 1). For these academics and ministers, there was a direct correlation between the demands for the advancement of the Black community and the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ “to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18 NRSV). The circumstances of the mid-1960s demanded a new/continued examination of Black life in the United States.

On “July 31, 1966,” a Black theology of liberation secured public voice and attention, “when 51 black pastors bought a full-page ad in the *New York Times* and demanded a more aggressive approach to eradicating racism” (Hagerty, 2008, p. 1). The article asserted “Black Theology” as the appropriate theological discourse based on the

tragedies and triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Hagerty, 2008). It emphasized the reality that White Christianity, corrupted by White supremacy, could not speak to or for the Black community. Moreover, it declared that “Black Theology” was rooted in the history and lived experiences of an oppressed people, in relationship to/with God, in the United States. In short, “Black Theology” professed that God was on the side of poor and oppressed Blacks. Among these academics and ministers seeking to respond to the injustices committed against the Black community was James H. Cone.

Born on August 5, 1938 in Fordyce, Arkansas, and raised in the racially segregated town of Bearden, Arkansas, Cone understood the suffering caused by White supremacy. Influenced by his parents, Mr. Charlie and Mrs. Lucy Cone, James H. Cone questioned injustice at an early age. As a child, he could not understand why the Black community experienced suffering derived from the sociopolitical structures controlled by the White community. He recalled,

I remember discussing with my brother Cecil the conflict between the Christian faith and black suffering, and no rational explanation seemed to satisfy either of us. *If God is good and also capable of accomplishing [God's] will, why then do black people suffer so much at the hands of white people?* (Cone, 1981, p. 161)

Furthermore, he struggled with the reality that White Christians humiliated, dehumanized, and silenced Black people on a daily basis. Although threatened by Whites in Bearden, Cone said his parents prepared him to become/be a social activist. His father influenced him in “his courage, sense of self, and commitment to end racial injustice” and his mother “gave [him] the gift of speech and faith. She was a public speaker in the

African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is where [he] discovered [his] own voice” (Rapoport, 1991, pp. 30–31).

As Cone moved from Arkansas to Illinois to Michigan, his experiences of injustice, inequality, and White supremacy continued to shape his worldview. He wrestled with the question, “What has the Gospel of God to do with the extreme limits placed on the black community?” (Cone, 1981, p. 163) as he studied at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (1958–1961) and Northwestern University (1961–1965). He continued to wrestle with his question as he taught religion and philosophy at Philander Smith College, Little Rock, AR, (1964–1966) and Adrian College, Adrian, MI, (1966–1969). It was during the summer of 1967, after 43 Black individuals were killed in the Detroit riot, that Cone determined he had to say something about “God and black people’s struggle for freedom” (Cone, 1981, p. 164). *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) was Cone’s response to the question he was wrestling with.

Black Theology and Black Power (1969) “was the first academic treatise to merge the contemporaneous struggles for racial, political, and socioeconomic equality with the critical concerns of Christian systematic theology” (Ware, 2014, p. 202). As a point of reference, systematic theology is a branch of Christian theology that attempts to present theological thinking and practice in an orderly and coherent way (McKim, 1996). It formulates a rational account of the doctrines of the Christian faith. It addresses issues such as the truth about God’s character, the study of the Bible, and/or what the Bible teaches about certain topics (e.g., Christ, church, humanity) (Carson, 2018). Because it is focused on truth, systematic theology is also framed to engage and address the

contemporary world (Carson, 2018). Cone was constructing a theology that situated the lived experiences of Black people at the center of the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He wrote amid the tensions between the assault on Black lives in America, the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, and the leaders of the Black Power Movement. Mainstream professors in the academy and mainstream churches throughout America were deeply troubled by and vigorously critiqued Cone's interpretation of the Gospel (Gross & Shorrock, *Fresh air*, 2008) because he challenged the *conventional wisdom* of systematic theology which was defined by the lived experiences of White theologians and the social realities of White supremacy. Clearly communicated, Cone (1975/1997) wrote,

Unfortunately, American theologians from Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards to Reinhold Niebuhr and Schubert Ogden, including radicals and conservatives, have interpreted the gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people. They have rarely attempted to transcend the social interests of their group by seeking an analysis of the gospel in the light of the consciousness of black people struggling for liberation. White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural history. (p. 43)

From the institution of American Slavery in 1619 to Cone's *God of the Oppressed* in 1975, American theology was not addressing the suffering, exploitation, and dehumanization of Black people in light of Jesus' proclamation "to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18). At the peak of Jim Crow, in the mid-20th century, American theology was not addressing the needs of a people's concrete situation of oppression. In fact, it perpetuated systemic and systematic oppression. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., straightforwardly addressed this reality in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (April 16, 1963). The letter was written to White clergy, in Birmingham, Alabama, who called his

activities (i.e., nonviolent direct action to racism) “unwise and untimely.” Dr. King addressed the clergy, in particular, and the White church/theology, in general. He wrote, in part,

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and mis-representing its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows...I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings, I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest? In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the [white] church. (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963)

Regrettably, in the 21st century, various forms of American theology (i.e., fundamentalism, prosperity) continue to deter individuals/communities from participating in the sociopolitical struggle for justice and maintain systems of oppression.

With his second text, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970/1986), Cone defined Black liberation theology relative to Christian theology. He wrote,

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel which is Jesus Christ. (Cone, 1970/1986, p. 1)

He bridged the Exodus narrative - God's deliverance of Hebrew slaves from 430 years of Egyptian bondage - and the liberatory ministry of Jesus - who was born into a marginalized Jewish community occupied by the Roman Empire - with the lived history/experience of the Black community in the United States (Cone, 1970/1986; Floyd-Thomas, 2014). He intended to alter the theological and social ideology that positioned Black Americans as *less than* human. Moreover, he developed a theological position in which God identifies with the oppressed, in general, and the freedom struggle of the Black community amidst oppression, in particular (Floyd-Thomas, 2014). In short, he argued, "Black Theology is the story of black people's struggle for liberation in an extreme situation of oppression" (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 49).

A Black Theology of Liberation (1970/1986) was the first work of Black systematic theology. Thus, Cone is the first theorist to write a Black *systematic theology*. For this reason, he is considered the *founder of contemporary Black theology* (Burrow, 1993). Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970/1986), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975/1997) were the first major texts within Black Liberation Theology, as an academic discipline. With these texts, Cone critiqued White supremacy, White Christianity, and called for a theology constructed from the history, experiences, and sources of the Black community.

For a reader who is new to or unfamiliar with *God of the Oppressed*, I want to provide a synopsis of the text. At the same time, this synopsis should not deter a reader from exploring *God of the Oppressed* for themselves. James H. Cone's *God of the Oppressed* is a combination of philosophical, political, social, and theological theory that

intersects with the suffering of Black people in the United States. His central point is “one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 14). Cone asserts that “it is impossible to do Christian theology with integrity in America without asking the *question*, what has the gospel to do with the black struggle for liberation?” (1975/1997, p. 6). It is in the introduction to *God of the Oppressed* that Cone poses the question and articulates his thesis. Too, he names two sociopolitical realities that shaped his consciousness: the black Church experience at Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and the significance of White supremacy in Bearden, Arkansas.

In Chapter 2, “Speaking the Truth,” Cone articulates the necessity of investigating anew “the problem of the color-line,” the social existence of African peoples, and theology un/related to human existence (1975/1997, p. 15). For Cone, the truth of theology must emerge from the history and lived experiences of Black people and not White theologians. The theological concepts of Black Theology of Liberation are rooted in an interplay between Black experience, Scripture, and Jesus Christ as “liberator of the oppressed” in “the struggle of the oppressed for freedom” (Cone, 1975/1997, pp. 29–31). Cone examines the social context of theological language, in Chapter 3, “The Social Context of Theology,” by way of the sources of theology: Black experience/history, Scripture, and Jesus Christ. He defines Christian theology as “human speech about God,” situated within “historical circumstances,” and limited by the “mental grid” of existence (Cone, 1975/1997, pp. 36–41). He argues that theological language is a reflection of

cultural, historical, and sociopolitical conditioning. Thus, liberation of the oppressed from sociopolitical realities cannot be separated from language about God.

In Chapter 4, “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence,” Cone posits that “the God of the Bible is involved in history,” “to know God is to experience the acts of God in the concrete affairs of people,” and that God is revealed in Black history as well as the suffering of Black people (1975/1997, p. 57). For Cone, as God is revealed in the Exodus of Israel in the Hebrew Bible, so God is revealed in the liberation of Black people from sociopolitical bondage in America. Specifically, God is revealed in Jesus Christ as the liberator. Cone wrote, “The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel *but is* the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1975/1997, p. 75).

In Chapter 5, “Black Theology and Ideology,” Cone asked, “How do we distinguish our words about God from God’s Word, our wishes from God’s will, our dreams and aspirations from the work of the Spirit?” (p. 1975/1997, p. 77) He posits that Black theology must delineate between divine revelation, human aspirations, theology, and ideology. He asserts that the question theologians must ask, “is not whether their theology is determined by social interest, but rather, *whose* social interest, the oppressed or the oppressors?” (p. 87) He argues, in Chapter 6, “Who is Jesus for Us Today?,” that a focus on the sociopolitical context means the concreteness of everyday life cannot be separated from questions about Jesus. Black Theology of Liberation affirms a dialectical

relationship between “Christ’s” meaning for us today and “our encounter with the historical Jesus as the Crucified and Risen Lord who is present with us in the struggle of freedom” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 111). Cone theorizes that Christ is Black both literally and symbolically given the dialectical relationship.

In Chapter 7, “The Meaning of Liberation,” Cone begins with the question, “If Jesus Christ, in his past, present and future, reveals that the God of Scripture and tradition is the God whose will is disclosed in the liberation of oppressed people from bondage, what then is the meaning of liberation?” (p. 127). He continues by defining liberation as “the project of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation” (p. 127). Cone posits that liberation is in relationship to God, self, community, and the overall project of hope for all. Too, he asserts that liberation is historical and political.

In Chapter 8, “Divine Liberation and Black Suffering,” he continues to explicate the relationship between oppression and freedom by addressing the biblical theme of the “Suffering Servant”. In so doing, Cone claims Jesus as the suffering servant who reveals God’s involvement with the suffering of the oppressed, particularly Black people. To this end, he wrote, “The pain of the oppressed is God’s pain, for God takes their suffering as God’s own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control of their lives” (1975/1997, p. 161). Cone concludes Chapter 8 by stating that Black people “as God’s Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity” (p. 178).

In Chapter 9, “Liberation and the Christian Ethic,” Cone argues that ethics cannot be separated from theology. Theology is a reflection on the meaning of God’s revelation

with the historical struggle of the oppressed for freedom. Therefore, the starting point of defining ethical behavior is not Western, White theology or “the established power of the state,” but the gospel of Jesus and the Black experience (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 181). “The ethic of liberation,” wrote Cone, “arises out of love, for ourselves and for humanity” as the oppressed commit “to the struggle of freedom and the willingness to take the risk to create a new humanity” (1975/1997, pp. 199–201).

And, in Chapter 10, “Liberation and Reconciliation,” Cone addresses reconciliation and forgiveness as it pertained to the violence Black people were experiencing in America. Specifically, he was responding to questions posed by White Christians/Theology. The questions: “What about the biblical doctrine of reconciliation?” “What about Christian forgiveness?” “Can’t black people find it in their hearts to forgive us?” In the final chapter, Cone evaluates the Christian doctrine of reconciliation in the light of black people’s unwillingness to forget the pain of their existence, and to relate to biblical history” (1975/1997, p. 209). For Cone, reconciliation is not simply a human act. It is also a divine act. “God’s reconciliation,” he argues, “Is a new relationship with *people* created by God’s concrete involvement in the political affairs of the world” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 209). Thus, White Christians/Theology cannot define the terms of reconciliation for Black people or America; instead White Christians/Theology must align with God’s liberating presence and revolutionary acts to change economic, political, religious, and social structures that maintain systems of oppression.

On the whole, Black Theology of Liberation, in the 1960s and 1970s, sought to expose and dismantle the “grand narrative of oppression” for the Black community –

namely, racism and white supremacy (Cannon & Pinn, 2014). However, the Black community and its leaders did not agree on a singular approach to addressing White supremacy and racism. Dr. King offered a nonviolent, direct action approach (civil disobedience) to economic, political, and social racism. Stokely Carmichael called for Black Power in economic and political terms (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). Black preachers and churches that were not aligned with Dr. King promoted gradualism, working within the system, to attain political change. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad (1965), Malcolm X, and the Nation of Islam claimed Christianity was the “white man’s religion” and the Black community should create its own “nation,” apart from White America. So, as Black liberation theology was seeking to expose and dismantle the realities of oppression for the Black community, it was also seeking to answer the question: “Can you be both black and Christian?” (McMickle, 2018, p. 3) For Cone, the answer was *yes*.

Based on his understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X as prophets and cultural critics, Cone tackled their contrasting messages blending the social gospel of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the social analysis of Malcolm X. Malcolm X taught Black people to defend, empower, and love themselves in a society dominated by Whiteness. Martin Luther King, Jr., taught Black people to love themselves in relationship to their neighbor, through nonviolent action, in a society dominated by violence and hate. Black liberation theology, then, received its Black identity from Malcolm X and its Christian identity from Martin Luther King, Jr., (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; as cited in Gross & Shorrock, *Fresh air*, 2008). Cone argued, “While one can be

black and Christian, one cannot be a racist or a white supremacist and a Christian. God is working for the liberation of the oppressed, and God's people must assume that same position" (as cited in McMickle, 2018, p. 4). As a result, Black liberation theology teaches Black people to be *unapologetically* Black and Christian at the same time (Cone, 1981, cited in Gross & Shorrock, 2008).

Notwithstanding the influences of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Black liberation theology is rooted in the liberatory mission of Jesus articulated in Luke 4:18–19. The text reads,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (NRSV)

Jesus identifies with the marginalized and the oppressed in his community. Furthermore, he professes that God has given him the authority to empower the poor, speak truth to power, and pursue justice in his context. In other words, Jesus committed his life, in solidarity the oppressed, to confront the powerful, whether the Jewish religious authorities or the Roman government authorities.

As slaves, former slaves, activists and leaders, in different times and spaces, in the Black community, read and listened to the story of Jesus, by way of the Gospels, they connected with his vision of liberation and his moral principles. Leaders like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., did not perceive Jesus as a White man, but they perceived that his teachings, life, and legacy were co-opted by a White supremacist ideology. Black liberation theology (re)claims the Jesus born to an oppressed community and extends his

mission to liberate the oppressed from external/systemic oppression as well as internalized oppression.

Black liberation theology centers the marginalization of Black people, but its work is not limited to the Black community. It is for the Black community in that it is concerned with the poor, the marginalized, and the voiceless. However, it *is not* primarily concerned with the Black community in that it is concerned with *all* poor, marginalized, and voiceless. Today, for many within and without the Black community, Jesus and the Gospels remain a moral compass for equality, equity, and justice in society.

Black liberation theology is constructed from the communal history, experiences, and sources of the Black community together with the life of James H. Cone. Cone's critical analysis of America, American theologians, and systematic oppression began with his experiences in Bearden, Arkansas. His historic context shaped the questions he addressed to God, the church, the community, and society. Yet, Cone did not always recognize the importance of his lived history and its impact on his theology. In reflecting on *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970/1986), he realized important aspects of his life were missing. He needed to show the significance of Bearden, Arkansas, Macedonia A.M.E. Church, and the imprint of both communities on his theological consciousness. As he reflected, in *God of the Oppressed* (1975/1997), he wrote,

In Bearden, a small community with approximately eight hundred whites and four hundred blacks, two important realities shaped my consciousness: the black Church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people. The black Church introduced me to the essence of life as expressed in the rhythm and feelings of black people in Bearden, Arkansas...Because I have lived the Bearden

experience, I cannot separate it from my theological perspective. I am a black theologian! I therefore must approach the subject of theology in the light of the black Church and what that means in a society dominated by white people. (pp. 1–4)

In a White society that put Black people in their place, Macedonia A.M.E. Church reminded Cone that he was loved, cared for, and valued. Through prayer, song, sermon, and story, the Black community in Bearden was frequently visited by God, which helped them live with “separate but equal” schools, “colored” water fountains, and being called a nigger – “unless [they] were prepared to leave town at the precise moment of [their] rebellion” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 2). As a result, it follows that Cone would question how White people could think of themselves as Christians, faithful servants of God, simply because they were “nice,” went to church, and “did not lynch and rape niggers” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 3).

How could the God of an oppressed people be the same God of a people who oppress? In reality, the God of Macedonia A.M.E. Church that called for freedom was not the God of White Christians who maintained systems of oppression. “The black Church,” wrote Cone, “taught me how to deal with the contradictions of life and provided a way to create meaning in a society not of my own making” (1975/1997, p. 2). In this way, Cone’s theological questions/reflections and Black liberation theology are inseparable from the Bearden experience and the Black experience in America. Today, the aforementioned question is a question that remains.

As a critical social theory, Black liberation theology is a careful proclamation of justice in light of religious sensibilities. The principles of Black liberation theology, the

critique of Black liberationists, and the work of James H. Cone converge at the point of the relationship between the church context and the social context in which it is embedded. As a critically engaged community, Black liberationists focus on the relationship between culture, domination, ideology, power, and scripture to deconstruct barriers to liberation, equality, equity, and democracy (Cannon, 2014; Cone & Wilmore, 1993; West, 1993; West, 2006). Black theologians acknowledge that Black people in particular and humans in general cannot speak of God without reflecting on their own history/experiences (Cone, 1975/1990; West, 1994). Black liberation theology has grown from a local theology, contextualized in the United States, to a critical social theory which includes the world (Cannon & Pinn, 2014). As such, Black liberation theology has influenced liberation theologies like Womanist theology, South African black theology, and Queer theology.

Black Liberation Theology: Two Manifestations

In the 21st century, Black liberation theology is included under the canopy of *African American theology*. African American theology is defined by two manifestations. The first manifestation being Black liberation theology and the second manifestation being Womanist theology (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). Womanist theology, a theological movement founded by Black women, is a response to and expansion of Black liberation theology. It is a response to Black liberation theology in that Cone's former students – Jacquelyn Grant, Katie G. Cannon, and Delores S. Williams – articulated its incompleteness related to the history and lived experiences of Black women (Cannon & Pinn, 2014).

The first wave of Black liberation theology was dominated by male voices and its primary focus was racism. The second wave of Black liberation theology, through the work of Grant, Cannon, and Williams, gave voice to the experiences of Black women and the reality of intersecting oppressions (i.e., racism, sexism, classism) (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, 2014). The term Womanist, in Womanist theology, emerged from the work of Alice Walker. Walker introduced the term “womanist” in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. As a Black feminist, Walker sought to expand the feminism of the Women’s Liberation Movement beyond its concern for the problems of White middle-class women. According to Walker, “a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color who is committed to the wholeness and well-being of all humanity, female and male” (as cited in Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 4). Womanists identify and critically analyze sexism, anti-black racism, and their intersection. Womanists recognize the beauty and strength of embodied Black womanhood and seek connections and solidarity with black men. Womanism identifies and criticizes sexism in the African American community and racism in the feminist community.

Womanist defines Womanist theology as a critical methodological framework for challenging/critiquing androcentric patriarchy as well as articulating “revolutionary acts of rebellion” in response to oppression (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 1). It centers the perspective of Black women in reflection, research, and analysis of theology, moral principles, and ethics. Central to the knowledge construction and consciousness of Womanist theology is praxis (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). Womanism is grounded in the lived

experiences of Black women, Black women's history, and their relationship with Jesus as emissary/liberator of the oppressed (Cone & Wilmore, 1993).

The seminal essay which sparked the Womanist movement was Jacquelyn Grant's "Black Theology and Black Woman" (1979). Grant, a systematic theologian and Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia, put forth a critique of black male theologians "who promoted a narrow definition of liberation that utterly ignored the gender discrimination and misogyny suffered by black women" (as cited in Floyd-Thomas, 2014, p. 206). She argued that the oppression of Black women was different from the oppression of Black men. She also asserted that Black women were more oppressed because they experienced intersecting oppressions from Black men and White women. Delores S. Williams (1993), author of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, expounded on Grant's scholarship and determined that:

Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm, and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. Womanist theology is a prophetic voice concerned about the well-being of the entire African American community, male and female, adults and children. (p. 67)

Adhering to Williams, Womanist theology argues that liberation is not limited to the "struggle for survival." Liberation is transforming the condition of oppression "for the development of a positive, productive quality of life" in order to thrive. Surviving and thriving are not one and the same. Surviving consist of adjusting one's posture (bending

one's back), being careful of one's words (silenced), and existing according to the exclusionary laws/policies established by a dominant group. Black women, marginalized within White society, the Black community, and the Black church, understood that surviving was/is not enough. Liberation had to be more than existing according to the rules of Black men and the laws of White America. Emancipation could not be limited to the freedom of Black men while Black women endured being restrained and silenced.

With the emergence of Womanist theology, Black liberation theology was challenged to embrace the fullness of Black women – their collective wisdom, their truth concerning oppression, and their praxis concerning liberation in the academy, church, and society. To thrive, liberation must involve the deconstruction of all oppressive systems with the expressed resolve to attain liberty for all. Womanist theology challenged oppressive forces impeding survival – including White American theology, Black liberation theology, and Feminism - to advance a positive, productive quality of life. Consequently, to thrive, liberation cannot end with the emancipation of one people to the exclusion/oppression of another people.

Context: Theological and Sociological

In the Black community, culture, history, experience, and religion are key elements to surviving and thriving amidst oppression. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone (1997) wrote, “It is called survival because it is a way of remaining physically alive in a situation of oppression without losing one's dignity” (p. 2). Historically, the Black/African American community has survived the Middle Passage, Slavery, and Jim Crow laws. Black communities built churches, schools, hospitals, and other institutions in

order to thrive amid the exclusionary practices of White society. Sadly, African Americans continue to experience violence and dehumanization indicative of the past.

In Chapter 1 of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, “The Rebirth of Caste,” Attorney Michelle Alexander (2012) provides an explanation of

the rebirth of a caste-like system in the United States, one that has resulted in millions of African Americans locked behind bars and then relegated to a permanent second-class status – denied the very rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement. (p. 58)

The new Jim Crow is linked to the prison-industrial complex which is a network of privately-owned prison companies and businesses that expand prisons in order to utilize the inmate population as *cheap* labor. And the prison-industrial complex is linked to the “School-to-Prison Pipeline” which is a process of criminalizing youth through “zero tolerance” and other disciplinary policies, within schools, that forces students into contact with law enforcement, juvenile detention centers, and the prison system. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, Black students are three times more likely than white students to be arrested. While Black students represent 16% of student enrollment, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to school-related arrests (2014). To date, the struggle for African Americans to survive and thrive, in the United States, continues.

When Cone and other African American liberationists write/teach/speak of Black history, experience, and theology, they foreground an existential crisis. Does my life and/or the life of the people in my community have value? Does my life and/or the life of

the people in my community have a purpose? In “Methodologies in African American Theology” (2014), Frederick L. Ware argues that Black liberation theology participates in a hermeneutical school. He (2014) writes,

The black hermeneutical school, which first emerged in clergy and seminary settings, is devoted to a quest for a ‘black hermeneutic’ – a method of biblical and theological interpretation that recovers and is representationally accurate with respect to the earliest expression of Christian faith and struggles for liberation among African Americans in the United States. (p. 131)

As a hermeneutical theology, Black liberation theology is concerned with describing the conditions in black communities that would and should give rise to a theology of liberation; thereby, improving Black life in America (Ware, 2014). To this end, African American theology takes seriously human experience.

I contend that the lenses through which one reads and interprets are shaped by their lived experience, communal history, and the social reality (context) in which they live. Therein, my research is grounded in the hermeneutical school of Black theology. To this end, my reading of scripture, liberative theological texts, and critical pedagogical texts are shaped by my lived history as a Black, male, Christian, educator, raised in North Carolina, from a people of African, Native, and European descent. Equally, my interpretive lens is shaped by our present realities in the United States and the blatant acts of racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, and capitalist elitism of President Donald J. Trump. Subsequently, because I take seriously human experiences of marginalization and oppression, I move between the hermeneutical school of thought and a humanist approach to Jesus (Pinn, 2012; Ware, 2014). That is, as I critically read and

teach biblical and non-biblical texts, in an academic setting, I recognize that Jesus and “God-talk” may not be central to students’ lived experience (Pinn, 2012, p. 3). Thus, as we, teacher and student, live into the fullness of our humanity, a humanist approach invites me to listen/see/feel their lived experience, while acknowledging I have a “blind-spot” concerning Jesus and “God-talk.” To state it differently, while I live according to a faith in God and Jesus, students do not need to believe in Jesus and/or God to ascertain the basis of liberation concerning human existence.

In *God of the Oppressed* (1975/1997), Cone outlined a method for doing Black liberation theology (Floyd-Thomas, 2014). He wrote that to constructively engage theology and the sources for doing Black theology one must ask the question: “What has the Gospel to do with the oppressed of the land and their struggle for liberation?” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 9). Anyone who fails to ask this question is ignoring the essence of the Gospel. He continues,

The sources include Scripture and tradition as they bear witness to the higher source of revelation as particularized and universalized in Jesus Christ. *But also, with equal and sometimes greater weight* [my emphasis], the sources must include the history and culture of oppressed people. (p. 9)

Otherwise stated, Black liberation theology is influenced by its socio-historical context, the beings who construct its knowledge, and the stories told about God. In this way, Black liberation theology is theological and sociological.

Unlike White American theology, which is and has been shaped by the cultural, political, and theological ideology of the dominant group, i.e., the ruling class, Black liberation theology is and has been shaped by Black peoples’ collective identity as

theological, political, and cultural victims in North America. Black people have responded to the socio-historical problem of American Slavery, Jim Crow, and enduring oppressive ideologies through the medium of stories (storytelling) as a way of conjuring images of God's liberating power and freedom for the oppressed not fulfilled in the historic present. Thus, the existence of God is not a theoretical idea divorced from the realities of oppression. Jesus, the "Son of God," came to set the oppressed free in his age (i.e., People of the Way), the present age (e.g., Civil Rights Movement, Repairers of the Breach), and the age to come (i.e., the perpetual process of liberation). Intricately woven into the Black freedom struggle are claims about who God is, what God has done, what God is doing, how God has done it, and how God can bring about liberation through the actions of people.

History frames our present realities and the history of the Black freedom struggle, in the United States, frames the ways I live as an educator, minister and researcher. I am a person of faith who believes that *people were created free* and liberation is an individual as well as a communal process of emancipating ourselves from *all forms of* marginalization and concrete situations of oppression. Equally, I believe the relief of oppression is an act of hope and love rooted in the liberatory ministry of Jesus Christ. The Black church/community, then, was/is a place to embody hope, love, and liberation. The clarion call of African American theology is for theological educators and students, religious leaders and people, to critically, positively shape their lives, their community, and society. In this light, Black liberationists are striving to change the world by (re)constructing the social order so that, for example: poor communities have access to

affordable healthcare, women are treated with equity, and LGBTQ persons are affirmed as *fully* human. No individual or group lives outside of the promise of freedom and the lived experience of oppression. The liberation of a particular group is connected to the liberation of *all*.

As I perceive it, my role as a Black liberationist is to aid individuals in developing a political and social awareness of society (Cone, 1970/1986), provide theological tools for responding to the dynamics of oppression and power (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Floyd-Thomas, 2006), and cultivate student-citizens as agents of change and transformation. As teachers and students reflect on oppressive realities and struggle collectively as critical responders, they locate themselves as (re)creators of cultural, economic, political, theological, and social systems. My hope is that students will grow in their critical theological and social consciousness. Therefore, inviting students to critically read texts by situating their lived experiences within their individual, communal, and social histories, to identify and envisage ways to transform systems that oppress, is a critical element of cultivating student-citizens as agents of social and theological change. Thus, agency, liberation, and the relief of oppression are essential to the work of Black liberation theology.

Cone's Liberation Theology

As a source of theology, Black history is a story of resistance against oppression and an exposition of the cruelty experienced by Black people in North America (Finley, 2014). Cone (1975/1997) articulated the relationship between Black history, Black theology, and the agency of Black people in *God of the Oppressed*. He wrote,

Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of “how we got over.” For theology to be black, it must reflect upon what it means to be black. Black Theology must uncover the structures and forms of the black experience, because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself. (pp. 16–17)

Black experience, then, is a story about the hopes and dreams of Black people, our resistance to marginalization and oppression, and our creative actions to change the conditions of our reality. It is an account of Black people living amidst the realities of death dealing circumstances. It is a depiction of an oppressed people determined to live liberated lives. Black history and experience are sources of Cone’s theology because they articulate the capture, enslavement, and maltreatment of Black people, as well as movements of liberation in the Black community (Finley, 2014).

Black experience is captured in numerous forms and structures. In the church, the Black experience is embodied in sermons, songs, and prayers (Cone, 1975/1997). Sermons speak to the challenges experienced on a day-to-day basis, recount the Biblical story in ways that connect the people (in the pew) with the ancients, disclose the power of God, and urge the people to live forward. Songs, ringing in the ear and soul, empower the people. Songs like James Cleveland’s *I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired*, Mary Mary’s *Can’t Give Up Now*, and Odetta Holmes’ *Oh, Freedom!* inspire action. *Oh, Freedom!* often associated with the Civil Rights Movement, is a post-Civil War African American spiritual and freedom song. At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963), Joan Baez sang *Oh, Freedom!* ushering it into a different genre - American Folk Music. The words are:

Oh, freedom!
Oh, freedom!
Oh, freedom over me!
And before I'd be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free

Oh, Freedom! “affirms the promise of God’s future for the oppressed” which transcends our deadly battle against the opposition to our freedom and “legitimizes the immediacy of struggle, survival, and radical liberation...in the here and now” (Turman, 2014, p. 256). Prayers disclose the power of the people to reject the value systems of our oppressors and claim our power in God. For God is acknowledged in prayer as the “way-maker,” “mighty good leader,” and “bridge over troubled water” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 20).

Outside of the church, the Black experience is personified in accounts of personal experiences (e.g., slave narratives), the blues and other musical creations (e.g., hip-hop cyphers), and tales of folk figures (i.e., High John the Conqueror) (Cone, 1975/1997). Slave narratives are an expression of the struggle for freedom as slaves and former slaves, in their own words, documented their life stories (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Cone, 1975/1997; Criner & Nash, 2006). Through their stories, former slaves such as Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, and Solomon Northrup shaped African American literature in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries (Criner & Nash, 2006). Tales of folk figures like High John the Conqueror were “the power of the slaves to hold themselves together in struggle” and their “incarnation of hope” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 24). High John’s presence served a purpose like, but not identical with Jesus Christ. With High John, slaves could affirm their being beyond their social limitations. In like manner, the blues and other

musical creations like Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom*, Kendrick Lamar's *Black Panther*, and James Brown's *Say It Loud – I'm Black And I'm Proud* tuned into the soul's spiritual, emotional, and physical need to express itself, absent God-talk, in the midst of hardship.

In 1968, James Brown, the "Godfather of Soul," sang with funk:

Uh! Your bad self!
Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud.
Say it louder! I'm black and I'm proud.
Look a-here!
Some people say we got a lot of malice, some say it's a lotta nerve
But I say we won't quit movin' until we get what we deserve
We've been buked and we've been scorned
We've been treated bad, talked about as sure as you're born
But just as sure as it takes two eyes to make a pair, huh!
Brother we can't quit until we get our share

Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
We tired of beatin' our heads against the wall
And workin' for someone else look a-here
There's one thing more I got to say right here
Now, now we're people, we're like the birds and the bees
We rather die on our feet than keep livin' on our knees

Say It Loud included a chorus of children singing: "I'm black and I'm proud." It was an expression of value, pride, and dignity in Black people for the Black community. It called on Black people to see Blackness, in all of its colorful hues and textures, as beautiful, natural, and loveable (Rivers, 2018). In a society centered around Whiteness, *Say It Loud* was more than a song. It was a clarion call to transcend the limitations imposed on us by others as well as the limitations we imposed on ourselves.

Black history, as a source of theology, includes life in the church and life outside of the church because both originated from the same historical community and "thus

represents the people's attempt to shape life and live it according to their dreams and aspirations" (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 22). Furthermore, songs, sermons, stories, and prayers, elements of the Black experience, are forms of agency which reveal Black peoples' need to communicate the contradiction between the realities of oppression and the promise of freedom in the United States. Through these forms, we, Black people have affirmed our humanity, named the tragedies of our experience, refused to be imprisoned by injustice, and created ways to live, in an oppressive society, as we struggled for freedom.

Black history and experience are foundations for critical reflection on the past and determined agency in the present. As such, the first source of Cone's theology is Black experience and the second is Scripture. In this way, the Bible is not read as the objective "Word of God," a word removed from the day-to-day experiences of the people; rather it is read through the lens of a Black freedom struggle which is a particular response to White supremacy (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Cone, 1975/1997; Finley, 2014). For Cone (1975/1997), the Bible is "one witness to God's empowering presence in human affairs," but it is not the "*only* word of liberation" (p. xi). As one who believed in a transcendent God and the person of Jesus, Cone wrote out of his lived history as a Black man and a Christian struggling for freedom in the mid-20th century. It is important to grasp this fact because Cone's theology, as with Freire's theology, is birthed out of his experience with systematic oppression.

A critical reflection on Black history reveals the agency of Black people (i.e., "Black Power"). Black history, experience, and a critical interpretation of Scripture counter the idea that power is only in the hands of the oppressor (Cone, 1970/1986; Cone,

1975/1997; Floyd-Thomas, 2006, 2014). It counters the idea that the oppressed are simply objects of their oppressors. It counters a theology which declares “slaves obey your masters” and/or perpetuates fatalism. Cone (1990) argued,

Black history is black persons saying no to every act of white brutality. Contrary to what whites say in *their* history books, black power is not new. It began when black mothers decided to kill their babies rather than have them grow up to be slaves. Black power is Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser planning a slave revolt. It is slaves poisoning their masters, and Frederick Douglass delivering an abolitionist address. This is the history that black theology must take seriously before it can begin to speak about God and black humanity. (p. 26)

Consequently, it is within this historical context that ideas about God and the actions of God, in the lives of Black people, are framed. Stated differently, an interpretation of God and God’s actions are formulated through lived experience. Cone did not develop a theology divorced from his lived experience and the history of Black people in America. There is an interplay between our theological understanding and our social existence.

Theology and Sociology

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone articulated the important relationship between theology, sociology, critical reflection, and action. With reference to Ludwig Feuerbach, a 19th century German philosopher, anthropologist, and author of *The Essence of Christianity*, and Karl Marx, a well-known 19th century German sociologist, socialist revolutionary, and author of *Das Kapital*, Cone (1975/1997) wrote,

The ruling class promotes religion because it justifies the present material relations and also because it serves as a sedative for the oppressed, making them remain content with humiliation and suffering. As long as the oppressed believe that their future is found in a heavenly world, they will not focus on the needed revolutionary praxis to change this world. While Feuerbach pointed out the

unreality of the heavenly world, he did not show its revolutionary connection with this world...The importance of Marx for our purposes is his insistence that thought has no independence from social existence. (p. 39)

Werner Stark, a 20th century Czechian sociologist and author of *The Sociology of Knowledge: An Essay in Aid of a Deeper Understanding of the History of Ideas*, reaffirms,

We see the broad and deep acres of history through a mental grid...through a system of values which is established in our minds *before* we look out on to it – and it is this grid which decides...what will fall into our field of perception. (as cited in Cone, 1975/1997, p. 40).

Our perception of the world, the ways we live, and our actions in society are deeply connected to our socialization. Contrary to “conventional wisdom,” ideas about God are not objective and universal. Ideas “arise out of a framework of reality constructed by people” and ideas about God are the “reflections of social conditioning” (Cone, 1975/1997, pp. 40–41). Thus, thoughts about God, Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Church cannot be detached from the cultural, political, and social status of citizens in a given society. Correspondingly, thoughts about God, Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Church cannot be detached from issues of power, privilege, and oppression in our society.

Although God is eternal and transcendent, theological language is limited to the time and place of people communicating their ideas and beliefs about God (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003). Theology, including Black liberation theology, is socially constructed. We, individuals as well as social groups, cannot move

out from - get outside of - our lived experiences, which shape and (re)shape our world, without critical reflection and action. Our language about God may not be a true indication of who God is or how God functions; however, our language is a reflection of our hopes, dreams, determinations, and motivations concerning our social condition. Within Black communities, language about God was/is a source of empowerment, self-confidence, and value. Without critically reflecting on the “framework of our reality” and “the broad and deep acres of [our] history,” so as to change systems of oppression, theology does not address the needs of everyday people.

In view of this reality, Cone (1975/1997) asked, “What is the connection between dominant material relations and the ruling theological ideas in a given society?” (p. 39) Asked differently, what is the connection, in our society, between the governing language about God and the historic, economic, political, and cultural ideology of the dominant group? By asking this question, Cone stresses the need to critically analyze societal relations between dominant and marginalized groups, via theological language. Likewise, he provides an opportunity for the oppressed to ponder the actions they will take to “overthrow unjust societal conditions” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 38).

As the substantive source of Cone’s liberation theology, Scripture is read through the historic grid of an oppressed people in America and the historical conditions of an oppressed people in the ancient world. Scripture, as a source of meaning making, can shape and (re)shape consciousness. A reader’s relationship to Scripture changes as their consciousness changes and vice versa. For the oppressed, becoming aware of the ways we have been socialized by others’ interpretations of Scripture is paramount to

developing our critical consciousness. To read Scripture through the lens of the oppressor, or the ideology of a dominant group (i.e., Western, heterosexual, able-bodied), is to read through a history of domination where I, the marginalized, am simply an object of domination. The social context in which I live informs my theological questions, reflections, and actions. The interplay of Black experience, ancient realities, social context, social movements, and Scripture is “the starting point for an investigation of Jesus Christ’s meaning for today” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 99).

Jesus Christ and Agency

To investigate the meaning of Jesus Christ for today, the student-theolog must return to the Jesus of history. The dialectic of Scripture and contemporary social context pushes students and teachers, in the theological classroom, to analyze their knowledge of Jesus Christ together with the historical reality of Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew (Cone, 1975/1997). Separating Jesus from his lived history contradicts the idea that Jesus is the model for agency in the present. It is his history, as a medium of understanding and meaning making, which grounds his significance. Jesus was shaped by the social context of his day which shaped his theological questions, reflections, and actions. By analyzing the historical significance of Jesus, as a person present to oppression and suffering in his community, a student learns to critically reflect on their ideas/beliefs about the presence of Jesus Christ for today.

To the extent that a student-theolog chooses to critically reflect on their ideas/beliefs, they may be challenged by the thought of analyzing the historic Jesus. For centuries, the humanity of Jesus has been submerged by the idea of his divinity. Church

history and ideology have determined that Jesus Christ: (a) was with God before creation, (b) became flesh so that human-beings “might be made God,” and (c) returned to sit “at the right hand of God” once his earthly ministry was completed (Cone, 1975/1997, pp. 106–107). Without centering the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, we lose the historical significance of his ministry which speaks to our concrete social context.

Jesus was a minister to the poor, the dispossessed, and the outcast (Luke 4:18). He was born during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, i.e., Tiberius Caesar (Luke 2). His family was forced to seek asylum to escape life-threatening violence (Matthew 2:13–14). He questioned the economic, political, and religious status quo (Mark, Matthew, Luke). Therefore, if Jesus Christ is present today, is his presence reflective of the life he lived? If so, then a critical reflection on his past will guide a student-theolog through a critical reading of Scripture and inform their current praxis. By reflecting on their lived experience, the lived history of Jesus, and their social context, students learn to participate in a process of questioning their ideas/beliefs, analyzing Church history and ideology, and offer a critical response to their concrete situation.

God and Agency

In Black liberation theology, the transcendent God is not limited by the social realities of oppression, does not limit Black people to oppression, and did not create Black people for oppression. In the same way, God did not create human beings for oppression. God is the source of agency because the oppressed are moved by the Spirit of God to act against their oppression. Jesus, as the embodiment of God’s perspective concerning the oppressed, is central to Cone’s theology because he lived and died under a

system of oppression, but, by God's power, he was not conquered by it. Thus, he is the substance of Black people's confidence, visions, and movements. "He was chosen by our grandparents, who saw in his liberating presence that he had chosen them and thus became the foundation of their struggle" (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 30) and, subsequently, our struggle. Our grandparents, i.e., enslaved Africans/Americans, had to choose between accepting their ostracism and the value system of their oppressors, or "discover a new way of confronting their socially constructed reality" (p. 31). Jesus was the new way which enabled them to act toward liberation.

Cone's Pedagogical Praxis

Black liberation theology reads the Bible, the Christian tradition, and the world through a lens of radical social change (Cannon & Pinn, 2014). Cone (1981) wrote, "What *is*, is not supposed to be, and we are required by that conviction to project a future social order wherein all can develop to their fullest potential" (p. 166). The process of attaining our fullest potential is a critical educational process that involves deconstructing systems of oppression that encompass our daily lives. As I perceive it, emancipatory theological education is a process involving critical reflection, imagination, and action to dismantle unjust systems. As a theological and a pedagogical (consciousness-raising) process, Black liberation/African American theology is grounded in the individual, communal, and societal shift from oppressive to liberative ways of being/becoming (Cannon, 2014; Hopkins 1999). The transformation of the classroom, the church, and society is a people's struggle for liberation.

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone does not take-up pedagogy, directly. However, I submit that his language concerning “liberation and the Christian ethic” offer insight into his pedagogical praxis (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 179) and the pedagogical praxis of African American theology. If theology is the foundation of ethics, as Cone suggest, then the theological educator is defined by their lived experience and actions in the classroom. Therein, the theological classroom could be shaped by an interpretation of “Christian ethics as an act for the liberation of the oppressed” or it could be shaped by an interpretation of Christian ethics as a means of maintaining the status quo (p. 183).

Because the classroom is a microcosm of society, the teacher and the students, with one or the other interpretation of Christian ethics, will navigate the tension between the reality of oppression and the potential for freedom. “As teachers, theologians are instructors in the faith, clarifying its meaning and significance for human life” (p. 8). Whether the teacher approaches the classroom with an interpretation of Christian ethics as an act for the liberation of the oppressed or develops this interpretation through the process of consciousness-raising, their actions will be informed by their understanding of who God is and what God is doing in the lives of people, every day. “What God has done and is doing to liberate the oppressed from slavery and injustice,” wrote Cone (1975/1997), cannot be separated from “the ethical question ‘What am I to do?’” (p. 180). In sum, the behaviors/actions of a critical liberative theological educator are intricately connected to their awareness of God as the liberator of the oppressed.

For Cone, as previously established, the sources of Black liberation/African American theology are Black history, experience, and Scripture. Likewise, then, the

sources of his Christian ethic, i.e., pedagogical praxis, are Black history, Black experience, and Jesus Christ. He reiterates,

The ethical behavior of Christians, therefore, is defined in and by the oppressed community whom God has called into being for freedom. To ignore the historical context of the oppressed community and speak of God's politics in universal terms without specificity of words and deeds of the victims in struggle of freedom, is to distort the theological enterprise and the ethical dynamics of God's presence in the world...the behavior of Christians is decided by God's act of liberation in Jesus Christ to set the captives free. (p. 189)

Since liberation is at the center of Cone's ethic it follows that his pedagogical praxis would include reflection, (de)construction, (re)construction, and transformation.

In reflecting on his first teaching experience (1964–1966) at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, Cone said that as he attempted to teach Black students about the significance of theological discourse, he realized it did not connect with their lives (Burrow, 1993; Cone, 1975/1997). As a student, Cone studied theologians such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich, but their ideas about God did not reflect his history and lived experience. His actions, as a teacher, were informed by his theological education, but he needed to think critically about theology in relation to his life and the lives of his students (Kirylo & Cone, 2011). As a result, he needed to do more than change the content of the course. He needed to transform the presentation of himself and (re)construct his pedagogy (Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003).

Cone's students "refused to accept a prefabricated theology" which drove him back to "the primary art forms of the black religious experience" (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 5). Thus, he began to shift away from a White-centered theology toward a Black-centered

theology. That is to say, he began to center himself and the lives of his students, members of a marginalized group, and (de)center theologians such as Tillich, Bultmann, and Barth, members of the dominant group. In like manner, he transitioned away from the dominant group as the source of meaning making toward Black history/experience as *the* originating source.

Additionally, Cone's students challenged him to be dialogical. Their refusal of a "prefabricated theology" implies a refusal of a prefabricated curriculum. As such, the classroom became a space where Cone's life and the lives of his students were centered, critical reflection was possible, and dialogue shaped actions. As I perceive it, Cone's pedagogy was intricately woven into his life as a theologian, ethicist, and Christian. However, because he did not address pedagogy, directly, I was prompted to search Black liberation theology for scholars who have.

Womanist Theology/Pedagogy

My search for Black liberation theologians attentive to pedagogy led me to Womanist scholar Katie G. Cannon. As a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Cannon experienced a "predominantly male setting, alienation, isolation, and marginalization" (Cannon, 2014, p. 320). Therefore, she engaged liberation, Christian ethics, and pedagogy through her experience as a Black woman, in theological education. Cannon, along with other Black women, suffered incivility and disrespect from male classmates who said they were "too attractive, or [their] legs too shapely, or [their] bosoms too buxom for anyone to hear [their] intelligent treatises and well-reasoned commentaries" (p. 320).

In her essay, “Pedagogical Praxis in African American Theology,” Cannon (2014) articulated the relationship between ethics and pedagogy. As a point of historical reference, Cannon developed her definition of *liberation ethics*, as a tutor in Introduction to Christian Ethics with Dr. Beverly Harrison at Union Theological Seminary in New York, in 1981 (Cannon & Pinn, 2014). In her essay, she wrote,

Liberation ethics is debunking, unmasking and disentangling the ideologies, theologies and systems of value operative in a particular society. “How” is it done? By analyzing the established power relationships that determine the cultural, political and economic presuppositions and by evaluating the legitimating myths which sanction the enforcement of such values. “Why” is it worth doing? So that we may become responsible decision-makers who envision structural and systemic alternatives that embrace the well-being of us all. (p. 323)

As a Womanist and the Annie Scales Rogers Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, Cannon was influential in developing a liberationist pedagogy which centered the lived experiences of Black women, Black people, and other marginalized groups. According to her definition of liberation ethics, the theological educator will approach the theological classroom as a space for: (a) critical reflection on the effects of socialization, (b) critical (de)construction of theological and social norms, and (c) critical (re)construction of individual as well as communal relations for the transformation of all. Pertinently, the “what,” “how,” and “why” of Cannon’s definition provide perspectives for how to develop a syllabus, select required texts/readings, organize the sequence of assignments, prepare instructional strategies, and create assessment questionnaires (Cannon, 2014, p. 323).

“Womanist pedagogy” developed new modes for critically analyzing the praxis of the study of religion in order to “invite women and men of contemporary faith communities” to “engaged theological scholarship” which encounters the lives and contributions of oppressed people (Cannon, 2014, p. 321). Cannon argued that engaged theological scholarship is organized around three major concepts: “historical ethos,” “embodied pathos,” and “communal logos” (p. 321). Historical ethos frames the critique of the “cultural context and political climate that prevail in formally structured learning environments” (p. 321). Embodied pathos centers personal experience as a mode of teaching and learning for “justice-making transformation” (p. 323). And communal logos distinguishes the “womanist classroom” as a space for “dialectical-dialogical conversations” (p. 324).

As students and teachers, Black women entered theological classrooms knowing that they were outsiders (historical ethos). They shared their stories in order to uncover oppressive Christian and societal practices (embodied pathos). They built community with others in order to deconstruct the barriers between them and reveal the obstacles which exist/ed for Black women (communal logos). By way of historical ethos, embodied pathos, and communal logos, Black women resisted exclusionary educational praxis and developed a critical awareness of the intersections of race, gender, class, power, and oppression. As a result, womanist pedagogy emerged from the lived experiences of Black women who challenged dominant educational and religious norms to “deconstruct those ideologies that lead into complicity with their own oppression” (Cannon, 2014, p. 320; see also Floyd-Thomas, 2006) and our collective oppression. Womanists expanded

Cone's argument that theology (and pedagogy) are only relevant when they are drawn from the experiences of the people they address.

Interpreting Cone's Theology, Pedagogical Praxis, and the Process of Liberation

It is through history and lived experience that theologians as teachers, members of religious institutions, and citizens of the world attempt to articulate faith in action. There is an interplay between theology and society. Black liberation/African American theology is a testament to the reality that language about God, i.e., God-talk, arises from the history/experiences of a people's struggle to fashion the meaning of life for their lives (Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Cone 1975/1997; Hopkins, 1999). "The [liberation] theologian" writes Lartey (2003), "begins from the position of being immersed in the experiences of poverty, marginalization and oppression" (p. 87). Without a social context, theology loses its meaning (Cone, 1975/1997; Howell-Baker, 2005).

Cone (1975/1997) wrote, "One's social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the question" (p. 14). Black liberation/African American theology asks the question: What has the history of Black people, the lived experiences of Black people, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to do with the voiceless, the poor, the oppressed, and their struggle for freedom in society? It is a critical question which shapes educational, theological, political, and social consciousness. It is a critical question which shapes the way one teaches and engages students as agents of theological and social change.

For the critical reader and student of liberation, the gospel offers a lens through which to read, (re)read, construct, (de)construct, and (re)construct the world. On the one

hand, the gospel is the story of a person, their experience, and their solidarity with the oppressed. On the other hand, the gospel is the story of a social movement, a counter-narrative and its evolution. The gospel speaks to and offers a way to (de)construct systems of power that oppress. From a pedagogical standpoint, the gospel discloses the hardships which accompany critique of the political/religious/economic status quo. It teaches students to be/become aware of the ways we are conditioned by social stratification. And it offers a new/different vision on relations of power – critical community.

Black Liberation/African American Theology: A Pedagogical Process

Shaped by the dominant culture, a formally structured learning environment does not center marginalized/oppressed people and/or reference our contributions to a long history of critical education in the United States. Thus, the cultural history of Black women, the political struggle of Black people, and the socialized oppression of the marginalized is the starting point for (de)constructing and (re)constructing the classroom. The critical educator with a liberation ethic will mold and (re)mold the theological classroom as a space for the process of liberation and transformation. If the theological classroom is envisioned with a liberation ethic, students will be challenged to critically engage the classroom, the church, and society.

In his essay, “Black Theology on Theological Education,” Hopkins (1999) wrote,

The aim, structure, and criteria of theological education arise from an analysis and experience of the movement for full humanity... Theological education, therefore, is the practice of holistic liberation constituted as a front of struggle and by a creative dynamic toward psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, and linguistic full humanity. Theological education looks at the God-human effort in

the world wherever Christians and others attempt a strategic effort to reveal and sustain a movement of liberation – a struggle to balance a communal connection of self, society, and creation. For theological education to pursue such a telos requires the detection, analysis, and transformation of knowledge regarding power. (p. 42)

By engaging liberation as a process, the theological classroom becomes a space for students to question the dissonance between their belief systems and their ethical behaviors, develop analytical skills for identifying oppressive realities of Christianity, and be/become heartened agents of social justice (Cannon, 2014; Freire, 1970/2003; Hopkins, 1999). Theological educators and students participate in the restoration and rebuilding of our humanity through our praxis (Cannon, 2014; Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 2013; Hopkins, 1999). Our actions as individuals and community determine our movement from inhumane, unjust treatment of all humanity and creation *toward* the humane, equitable treatment of the same (Cannon, 2014; Cone, 1975/1997, 2011, 2018; Freire, 2013; Hopkins, 1999). By not affirming the totality of our humanity, we reject our power to transform systems of oppression.

Becoming/Being Student-Theologs: Engaging the Public Square

Without a dialogical connection to the experiences of others, the epistemological perspective and the agency (social/political activism) of a particular group will not join with the shared ideas of a universal struggle for freedom (Howell-Baker, 2005). Because a search for God in human experience (i.e., Jesus as liberator) and language about God (i.e., God of the oppressed) is limited by context, the epistemological perspective of a particular group runs the risk of “self-referential inconsistency” (Howell-Baker, 2005, p. 39; see also Cone, 1975/1997). In other words, if liberation is to be liberation for all, then

it cannot be restrained to one issue or one perspective on oppression. If student-theologs are to learn how to engage public theology and the public square, they must learn to critically reflect on their ideas/belief systems as they actively listen to the ideas/belief systems of others. By questioning their belief systems, examining oppressive religious norms, and probing the connection with social realities, students begin to build a bridge between individual stories and communal (public) history.

For instance, as a teacher and minister, within the Black community, the history and lived experience of my people is an authentic starting point for teaching and learning; however, understanding the interplay between knowledge construction and socialization challenges me *not* to approach the theological classroom as if Jesus is the sole revelation of God for liberation. If I am to participate in the collective struggle for freedom, I must engage a revolutionary praxis which allows for critical and collaborative dialogue to emerge from others' unique experiences. In this way, theology, as a pedagogical and emancipatory process, invites the marginalized, the dispossessed, and the dehumanized, of storied circumstances, to grow in critical consciousness through dialogue, community building, and relational power.

Conclusion

“Theological education looks at the God-human effort in the world wherever Christians and others attempt a strategic effort to reveal and sustain a movement of liberation” (Hopkins, 1999, p. 42). We, liberationist Christians and theological educators, have committed ourselves to embody God and we are reminded of our commitment through our educational, ecclesial, and socio-political commitments. As a community, we

claim our vocation as co-creators, co-constructors of knowledge with God. However, this does not mean we do this work to the exclusion of non-Christians and/or non-theist. I believe, like Cone (1975/1997), that we, communities/individuals committed to the cause of liberation, “fight not for humanity in general but for [ourselves] and out of [our] love for concrete human beings” (p. 135).

Within theological education and the critical liberative theological classroom, we, teachers and students, echo the cries of Jesus and the prophets to stand for justice, equality, and the dignity of all. Our lives are active relationships with God that require active mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual engagement toward the fulfillment of humanity. We are called to live the deepest public concern of our faith – compassion, equality, love, equity, humility, and justice. If we live according to the gospel of liberation, I believe we will positively affect “the cause of the oppressed in the fight for justice” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 135).

CHAPTER IV

CULTIVATING AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: A MEANS TO
THE RELIEF OF OPPRESSION

Is not this the fast that [the Lord] choose[s]: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindication shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and [the Lord] will say, Here I am. (Isaiah 58:6–9, NRSV)

[Jesus] stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [the Lord] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [The Lord] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* And [Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down...Then he began to say to them, *today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* (Luke 4:16b–21)

It is essential for the oppressed to realize that when they accept the struggle for humanization they also accept, from that moment, their total responsibility for the struggle. (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 55)

Liberation is none other than the overthrow of everything that is against the fulfillment of humanity. (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 71)

Introduction

As educators, theologians, and theorists, Freire and Cone addressed systematic and systemic oppression through their lived experiences and the lens of Jesus Christ.

They began with the concrete, i.e., their history, the history of their people, their historical context, embracing the cause of liberation through dialogue with scripture and conflict with fellow human beings. Through a process of critical inquiry and critical consciousness-raising, they analyzed oppressive cultural, economic, political, theological, and social systems. In so doing, they acted out of their love and hope for humanity. By way of their theology/pedagogy of liberation, they lived into the movement from an “old way” to a “new way” of being human. They loved poor, Black, oppressed, dehumanized people with a critical hope for the emancipation of all, including the oppressor (Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003). They lived the joining of love and justice, faith and praxis.

I approach *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed* with the thought that these texts have something to say about the educative process in the critical liberative theological classroom. I also recognize that these texts are *other* to me. History and tradition are lenses through which I am motivated by and connect with the liberative themes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, but I did not live the historic moments that Paulo Freire and James Cone narrate. In the case of Cone, as two Black men born in the United States, reared in the South, we share a history of Slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, Christianity, and the struggle of being Black in a world of White supremacy. Even so, our experiences are unique because our historic struggles with injustice are different. In the case of Freire, as two Christians who became critical educators, believing in the liberative teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, we share a history of European colonization, the Human Rights Movement, and the struggle against

a “culture of silence.” Even so, our experiences are unique because our historic struggles with inequality are not the same. As a result, I critically read to gain a deeper understanding of these texts, the context/history of these texts, the authors of these texts, the context/history of the authors, and my own context/history in relation to these texts - to discern *meaning* corresponding to contemporary possibilities in the critical liberative theological classroom.

For Cone and Freire, the struggle against oppression is intricately connected to a spirituality (faith) which sees the present and sees beyond it to a different reality. Their activism, faith, and scholarship was/is not removed from the lived experiences and suffering of everyday life. The violence caused by ableism, homophobia, poverty, racism, xenophobia, sexism, heterosexism, public policy, and pervasive neoliberalism is commonplace in North America, South America, and the world. The objectification and commodification of *all* people, particularly the oppressed, continues to enslave, denying the fulfillment of our humanity. Individualism keeps us subjugated to an ideology that denies the necessity of community. Fear of being accosted, arrested, or denied our right to dignity conditions our ability to discover our voice, speak our truth, and change our circumstances.

In other words, suffering is destroying humanity (and all creation). However, visualizing a present-future beyond the present-history incites a will to act against the established social order (Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003). In order to transform concrete circumstances of suffering, we, the oppressed, must come to embrace our birthright as free-beings, subjects of history, responsible members of the community, and

agents of theological/social change. As I perceive it, the activism, theology, and pedagogy of Cone and Freire remain guideposts for theological and social transformation in the 21st century.

Freire and Cone are the focus of my critical hermeneutic, interpretive inquiry because of their focus on liberation and change. Critical hermeneutics as “no one single thing, but a vast variety of interpretative strategies, each of which depends for its value and effectiveness on the nature of the text and the varied goals and situations of readers” permits an openness to embrace my cultural and experiential knowledge, in the academy and the church, as I consider an approach to the critical liberative theological classroom (Malcolm, 2018, p. 118). I define this critical hermeneutic, a method/ology of understanding, as searching out the wisdom of critical pedagogical and liberative theological texts to put forward an interpretation concerning the cultivation of students as agents of theological/social change.

When reading a text, the intent is not simply to agree with the author or to understand the author, but to come with the author to a different level of understanding regarding the subject being addressed (Schneiders, 1981; Slattey, 2013). The reader engages the text as a person willing to dialogue with the text and question the subject matter of the text. According to Gadamer (1975), dialogue is a helpful parallel for interpreting a text. The central idea being to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. Therefore, I submit that a dialogue with James Cone and Paulo Freire, by way of *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, guides me (as well as participatory

readers) toward a deeper understanding of the relief of oppression (liberation) as a theological and pedagogical process of transformation.

Interpretation is a process which, if critically engaged, invites a reader to move beneath and between the layers of a text, their relationship to a text, and their lived experience to develop a robust understanding of their present condition, offering a new or different way of approaching social realities. The critical hermeneutical encounter urges the reader to engage a text as if interviewing a person to learn who they are, where they come from, what they do, and how they perceive the world (Malcolm, 2018). Historical criticism, a method for critically deconstructing and critically reconstructing a text, within the method/ology of critical hermeneutics, invites a reader to move between the history of the text, its author, and the historic condition of the reader/researcher; thereby, drawing the reader into a hermeneutic circle, which is a dialogue between the world of the text and the world of the reader/researcher.

It is not enough for a reader/researcher to ask, “What does the text say?” A critical reader asks: What is the history *in* the text? What is the history *of* the text? What was the “locatedness” of the author? What question is the text trying to answer? Who were the first readers—original audience—of the text? How does the text apply to my current situation? How has the text been interpreted by others? What is my “locatedness” in relation to the text? With what lens or lenses do I read the text? The reader who approaches a text with these kinds of questions is exercising the basis of critical exegesis and critical literacy (Freire, 1970/2003; Kincheloe, 2008; Long, 2005; Malcolm, 2018; Miles, 2009; Shor, 1999).

Critical exegesis – a guide for “interviewing” a text – allows me (as well as participatory readers) to think with the texts and the authors. It is a process of asking questions, listening, reflecting, responding, and asking supplementary questions to gain a deeper understanding of the *other*. It is a process of allowing the text to speak for itself while discerning its meaning. It is a process of coming to understand my “locatedness,” as a reader, in relation to the text and allow myself to be *transformed* by the encounter.

I engage the critical hermeneutical process with Cone and Freire so that, through dialogue, we might form a “new horizon” – a new/different approach to contemporary realities caused by systems of oppression (Pokorny, 2011, p. 101). My goal in employing historical criticism and critical exegesis is to aid students in developing reading strategies that will alter their reality. I do not offer historical criticism and critical exegesis as *the* method/ology for reading texts. I do, however, trust that historical criticism and critical exegesis will aid students in developing robust interpretations of texts as well as their critical literacy skills.

I read with unique intuitions and perceptions based on my history (pre-conceived notions) and lived experiences. In the same way, students read with their own intuitions and perceptions based on their history and lived experiences. We each read “the world and the word” based on our “locatedness” (Freire, 1996; Malcolm, 2018). My interpretive interview of and dialogue with Cone and Freire is a hinge on which the door of possibilities opens to respond to – *what wisdom might theological education, in an academic setting, gain from a conversation between critical pedagogy and Black*

liberation theology? Thus, the goal of the critical hermeneutical encounter is a “transforming engagement of horizons” (Malcolm, 2018, p. 80).

Exegeting the Text(s)

Before delving into the interpretive interview of and dialogue with Freire and Cone, I want to say a word about the critical exegetical process. As a guide for critically reading *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, my exegetical research guide outlines eight areas.

The areas are:

I. Selecting the Text

- a. Articulating the reason(s) for choosing the text
 - i. *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
are primary sources
- b. Clarifying if I chose the text or if the text chose me
- c. Communicating the historical relevance of the text

II. Approaching the Text

- a. Reading the text for basic understanding
- b. Establishing the focus of my reading
 - i. What am I reading for?
- c. Placing the focus of my reading in its larger context
 - i. How does my focus relate to the author’s full intent?

III. Interviewing the Text

- a. Who was the author?

- i. How did the author's life influence their writing?
 - b. What was the era of the author?
 - i. How did the context of the author influence the text?
- IV. *Being Interviewed by the Text*
 - a. Who am I?
 - i. How does my life influence my reading?
 - b. What questions is the text asking me?
 - c. How am I influenced by my era?
- V. Listening to the Text
 - a. Attending to the details of the text
 - b. Asking critical questions
- VI. Exploring What I have Heard in the Text
 - a. Checking what I have heard in the commentaries
 - i. Referencing authors/communities who have engaged the text
 - ii. Commentaries may be referred to as secondary sources
- VII. Conversing with and Responding to the Text
 - a. Reflections and musings regarding textual discoveries
 - i. "Fusion of Horizons"
 - 1. Conversing with Cone and Freire
- VIII. *Interpreting the Dialogue*

- a. Defining/describing the process of a theoretical framework
taking shape in light of my conversation with Cone and Freire
 - i. *New Horizon*

The interpretive interview of and dialogue with Freire and Cone is formalized in area seven – conversing with and responding to the text. However, areas one through six are steps which lead to area seven. Although the exegetical guide is presented linearly, exegesis is not a linear process. I was introduced to the formal process of exegeting a text in 2009 and, as a reader who was unfamiliar with exegesis, following an outline was helpful. Again, I offer this outline as a guide for the reader (e.g., student) who is unfamiliar with exegeting a text and the one who considers themselves a critical reader. As a reader follows the guide, there is and should be movement between the reader, the reader's locatedness, the text, the content of the text, the context of the author, the context of the reader, etc. For example, as I selected *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (area one), I was already engaging the question – how does my life influence my reading (my selection) of the text? (area four) - because I entered the process reflecting on a teaching experience.

There is a fluid relationship between my “locatedness” and selecting a text, approaching a text, interviewing a text, being interviewed by a text, etc. It matters that I am an educator and a minister reading texts by Cone and Freire because it is a part of my locatedness. There is a correlation between who I am as a person-in-the-world and the text(s) I read. In the same way, a reader who reads a text participates from their locatedness and their locatedness influences the way they apprehend a text. The

movement one experiences when critically engaging a text is representative of the way(s) we read and ask questions of a text, differently. Critical exegesis is designed to aid a reader in slowing the reading process in order to “come closer” to the text, its ideas, its author, and be confronted by it.

Throughout this project, I have maintained a journal which captures, in part, the process of critical exegesis. As a reader and researcher, the exegetical process has been lengthy. I began reading the text(s) for basic understanding, for this research project, in the fall of 2017. Reading the text for basic understanding initiated the process of becoming aware of *all* that the text contains/offers. To this end, I want to share excerpts from my journal as a pre-cursor to the dialogue and as a way of illuminating the critical exegetical process as well as the fluidity of the exegetical research guide.

Journal Entry – September 16, 2017

After a conversation with Dr. Villaverde and Dr. Miles about my research project, I find myself asking this question: why am I reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*?

- What can these texts teach me?
- How can these texts guide me in learning more about myself as a teacher?
 - I want to engage thinkers who are addressing critical, moral, ethical, spiritual, and political matters that affect the character formation of students. I want to engage the texts as guides for addressing contemporary issues of injustice, inequity, and inequality because many students seem to be apathetic about ending injustice. As a student, I do not remember being apathetic about the wrongs I saw, read, or heard. I am unsure how I relate to or should relate to students and their apathetic attitudes. It is like students do not care. I want students to care, but I do not know how to make someone care without getting angry. I am reading these texts because I think they provide insight into growth, change, and the relationship between the apathy students express and the lives we live.

I chose this journal entry because I was responding to a question that was asked in order to help me articulate the reason(s) for choosing the text(s) (area one). As I responded to the question, after a conversation with two professors, without realizing it, I was experiencing the movement of exegesis. When I began reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, I was not thinking about one particular classroom, i.e., theological classroom, or one student, i.e., my student in the Christian Ethics course. I was wanting to understand students' attitudes and my relationship to/with them. As I read *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for basic understanding (area two), I began to focus on words (e.g., freedom, indoctrination, practice, liberation), phrases, chapters that might help me process why students could be apathetic, why I did not recall being apathetic as a student, what I could learn/apply as a teacher, and how I might apply my learning with students in a classroom. In this way, I began to establish the focus of my reading while, simultaneously, processing the way(s) my life influenced my understanding of these texts (area four). As a result, as I read both texts, I began to recognize that lived experience, social history, and context are shared themes that would help me understand myself as well as students.

Journal Entry – April 4, 2018

The more I read and (re)read, the more I realize how much of who Freire and Cone are is embodied in their writing. I am taken by the fact that Freire slips into the term convert as he writes about transforming the unjust order. Why convert (as a term)? He is writing/talking about a religious experience. Freire uses convert, conversion, and communion. This has to be his theology.

- P. 47 - Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly.
- This conversion is so radical as not to allow of ambiguous behavior.

- To affirm this commitment but to consider oneself the proprietor of revolution wisdom – which must then be given to (or imposed on) the people – is to retain the old ways.
- The man who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with people, whom he continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived.
- Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth.

What's Freire's story? I know these words. What's my story in relationship to him? I use these words in the church, but I rarely (if ever) use these words in the classroom. Freire is writing about being born again, becoming a new creation, being transformed from an old way of being. This is Christian language. So if anyone is in Christ...behold all things become new. He is talking about connecting the dots between the past and the present in order to be free. Is there a defining relationship or experience in my story that explains my current struggles and/or behaviors?

Cone says that the oppressed have been victims of mental and physical dehumanization but the destruction of humanity, even among the oppressors, cannot be an end in itself.

- P. 199 – Our intention is not to make the oppressors the slaves but to transform humanity, or, in the words of Fanon, set afoot a new [humanity].
- Thus, hatred and vengeance have no place in the struggle for freedom.
- Indeed, hatred is a denial of freedom, a usurpation of the liberation struggle.
- The ethic of liberation arises out of love, for ourselves and for humanity.

Freire and Cone are talking about a change from an old way to a new way. Cone is talking about freedom from hatred and violence for black people, but he is also talking about love and the way love can transform/change a violent situation. Can love, acted out in the classroom, change the attitudes of students? Cone does not use the words convert, conversion, or communion, but, in reality, he is talking about the same. Am I converted? What in me is still living out an old way? Do I still embody the violence I have experienced? What of the old way could students be living? If I am still embodying the violence I have lived, then students must be living with violence as well. Do students know they are living with the violence of oppression? How do we move from an old way to a new way, in a violent world? Change/conversion/transformation is a process that invites individuals to understand the ways they have been formed in order to change themselves and their circumstances, I believe. Liberation is fundamentally connected to the acts of individuals and communities, teachers and students.

I highlight this journal entry as an example of listening to the text(s) (area five)

and the fluid movement between various areas of the exegetical process/guide. As I read,

I isolated paragraphs, sentences, and words in order to attend to the details of the text, which caused me to ask critical questions in relation to myself, students, and the process of moving from an old way to a new way of being-in-the-world. As is shown, I isolated what I was reading by using bullet points. As I isolated the readings, I thought about the questions the texts were asking me to consider and the way(s) violence (as a lived experience in our society), for example, is shared by Cone, Freire, students, and myself (area four). In so doing, I situated the focus of my reading within the focus of the authors' full intent (area two), namely liberation from all forms of oppression/violence/suffering.

As evidenced by my questions concerning Freire's story, his use of certain terms, and the correlation with Cone's thought, isolating sentences/words allowed me to be attentive in a way that led to exploring what I heard in commentaries (area six). Exploring what I heard from Freire and Cone, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, led me to exploring commentaries, i.e., secondary sources, such as, but not limited to interviews with scholars who studied with Freire and/or Cone or committed their academic pursuits to studying Freire and/or Cone's writings; Leopando's *A Pedagogy of Faith: The Theological Vision of Paulo Freire*; Darder's *The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Hopkin's *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*; and Cannon's *Pedagogical Praxis in African American Theology*. These and other secondary sources expanded and deepened my knowledge of Cone and Freire – their ideas, their themes, and their embodiment of pedagogy/theology.

Journal Entry – April 3–4, 2019

Talking with Dr. Brock and Dr. Crainshaw has helped me think – out loud – about what I am processing with Cone and Freire. Our conversations have invited me to ask more questions about myself in relation to these texts. Our conversations are also helping me to imagine, in a concrete way, a conversation with Freire and Cone. I am doing more than reading their works. I am really feeling what they are saying, how they are saying it, and their passion/fire for liberation. I am unsure as to how I can capture everything that I am feeling/receiving/experiencing with them. The texts are becoming more than texts. Freire and Cone are becoming more than two guys who wrote books on liberation and oppression.

- What is the text asking of me?
- What are Freire and Cone asking me to do when I talk to them?
- How do I become more sensitive and attuned to the lived experiences of others?
- What is the relationship between the Black Lives Matter Movement and U.S. History?
- What is the relationship between the #MeToo Movement, the inequality women experience, and biblical texts?
- How do students learn to ask similar questions?
- How am I doing the work of liberation with Cone and Freire (and others)?
 - Awareness. Reflection. Response.
 - Agency. Liberation. Relief of Oppression.

Asking questions, sorting quotes, processing thoughts: The teacher and the student are functioning within a system (systems) of oppression. The struggle to change these systems begins with the teacher and the student naming their world and identifying the conditions in which we live – naming/present/history, action, reflection (praxis). Students and teachers are conditioned by the world we live in. If Black lives do not matter in society, then Black lives will not matter in the classroom (theological or otherwise). If women are degraded in the classroom, then women will be degraded in the community. If naming our context leads to awareness, then naming our context leads to agency. If I can reflect on my awareness, then I can begin to remove the mental/emotional/spiritual/physical barriers that keep me in bondage (liberation). If I (teacher) can do the work of becoming aware through reflection, then a student can do the same (even if it is not at the pace I would prefer). Individually/collectively we can change our conditions...it is a process. We really CANNOT do the work of liberation without dialogue/discussion/conversation (self/other) in order to build community that might (no guarantee) result in change/transformation!!!

I highlight this journal entry as an example of exploring what I heard in the text (area six), reflections and musings regarding textual discoveries (area seven), and the fluid movement between various areas of the exegetical process/guide. I conversed with and responded to the texts (area seven) as I made sense of the questions/quotes/thoughts I was processing while navigating *God of the Oppressed*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the exegetical research guide. I did not come to this juncture in the exegetical process alone, but I came to this juncture in dialogue with teachers. My professors, Dr. Brock and Dr. Crainshaw (mentor at Wake Forest University), have taught for many years. In addition to their teaching experiences, they have reflected on the pedagogical and theological ideas of various scholars, including Freire and Cone. My conversation(s) with them helped me sit, again, with being interviewed by the texts (area four), ask critical questions of myself (area five), and reflect on what I am reading for (area two). I was able to grasp, on a deeper level, the embodiment of the teacher-student, student-teacher relationship and the influences of dialogue.

As I transition from the journal entries to the imaginative dialogue, I want to share a few notes that will guide a reader through it. The structure of this imaginative dialogue is a departure from the rest of this text. Comparably, the interpretive interview of and dialogue with Freire and Cone is a continuation of my journaling. On the one hand, I create an imaginative dialogue based on the exegetical process/guide and critical reading of the texts. On the other hand, as I dialogue with myself (i.e., self-reflexivity), I navigate my lived history/experience, story, social context, and potential interface with students. To this end, I include footnotes with the dialogue. The footnotes are important because

they capture the movement between myself, Cone, Freire, texts, a reader, and the exegetical process. Also, the footnotes are a way to contextualize the text and avoid parenthetical citations, which in this situation would distract from the imagined conversation. In addition to footnotes, I include “stage” and/or “setting” notes, similar to a performance script, to engage the reader’s imagination.

An Interpretive Imaginative Dialogue with Freire and Cone

As an idea in the process of becoming, a theological pedagogy of the oppressed, i.e., a critical liberative theological pedagogy, is a tapestry of love and hope for humanity, particularly the voiceless in society. As the son of a teacher¹ and the descendant of ancestors who are the edifice of my consciousness², I embody love and hope through my relationship with education and freedom. To me, teaching is a hope-filled praxis which is a response to hopelessness in our society. Equally, teaching is a love-filled praxis which has the potential to usher in a new/different way of being/becoming for students, teachers and humanity. To this end, I invoke an imaginative interview of and dialogue³ with Freire

¹ My mother, Olivia Garmon Thomas, retired in 2011 with 35 years of service to the State of North Carolina. She was a teacher, advocate, and administrator in Bertie, Martin, and Mecklenburg Counties. For 25 of the 35 years, she embraced, taught, and fought for children/youth with disabilities. In 2019, she continues to serve as a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) for children/youth in Mecklenburg County.

² Brock (2010).

³ *Sista Talk: The Personal and the Pedagogical* by Rochelle Brock (2010) is an elemental source for my imaginative conversation. In Chapter 2, *A Conversation with My Goddess Oshun: A Theoretical Framework in the Making*, Brock communicates pedagogical, theoretical, and philosophical ideas concerning the pain, persistence, and wisdom of Black women, through a conversation with the Yoruba Goddess of Love. Oshun, whose name is synonymous with transformation, reflects one of the manifestations of God. By invoking Oshun, Brock claims her subjectivity as a Black woman, a teacher, and a critical researcher in dialectical-dialogical relationship with the transcendent God, Black women, her students, and herself.

and Cone⁴ to help me (as well as readers⁵) glean wisdom concerning the relief of oppression and the critical liberative theological classroom. I claim Freire and Cone as my theo-pedagogical ancestors⁶. In so doing, I aim to (re)connect their pasts and their communion as liberationists with my research present. Central to this imaginative dialogue is the unquestionable link between education as the practice of freedom and theology.

Indicative of the *real* conversations I have had with various professors during this research journey, the dialogue with Freire and Cone is “real.” The timing is the present. The cast of characters are James Cone (JC), Paulo Freire (PF), and myself (Oliver Thomas, OT). The setting of our dialogue is a 2003 Mercury Grand Marquis. I am driving. Freire is seated in the front passenger seat and Cone is seated in the middle of the back seat, leaning forward. We are traveling from UNC Greensboro to a local church, in downtown Greensboro, for a Poor People’s Campaign march and meeting. We arrive at the church and I park the car. We have arrived early, before organizers ask participants to

⁴ As I prepared for my conversation with Freire and Cone, in addition to focusing on definitive quotes from each text, I read transcripts, listened to interviews, and watched lectures or panel discussions. In listening and watching each text, I imagined how we might interact. I considered what they might want to ask or know about me. In other words, I thought about what it would be like to be interviewed by Cone and Freire. I pondered questions such as: how did you come to read our books and know us, what are the ideas you struggle with, and what have you learned through this process. In my exegetical research guide, this is indicative of *being interviewed by the text and/or the author(s) of the text*.

⁵ I perceive participatory readership and critical literacy as educational strategies which lead to critical transformation. Participatory readership requires an attention to relational interpretation, that the interpretation cannot be achieved without the unique history and lived experience of the particular reader (Freire, 1996; Gadamer, 1975). Critical literacy involves reading for the recognition of power relations and critical consciousness, preparing readers (e.g., students) to ask critical questions (Shor, 1999). Participatory readership and critical literacy extend beyond a text as readers learn to read the world as a text (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2011).

⁶ Paulo Freire and James H. Cone are deceased. Freire died May 2, 1997. Cone died April 18, 2018. Yet, their words, works, and activism are influencing my pedagogy and theology. Like my familial ancestors, I feel a kinship to Freire and Cone.

line-up for the march. We sit and talk as we wait to join other members of the community.

Please join us...

OT: Dr. Freire and Dr. Cone, would you share how the two of you came to know one another?⁷

PF: [*With excitement and a smile on his face, Dr. Freire begins to speak.*]

First, let me say, I am grateful for the experience of being with the two of you. As individuals who struggle for liberation, dialogue is an important part of how we connect with one another and the world in which we live in order to transform it.⁸ I believe we did not come to keep the world as it is. We came to the world in order to remake the world.⁹ I have greatly admired James Cone for what he stands for. He is a committed man, saturated in this real world, which he analyzes with the authority of one who has experienced it.¹⁰

JC: [*Before Dr. Freire can finish speaking, Dr. Cone chimes in with heartfelt admiration.*]

⁷ I greet Paulo Freire and James H. Cone with the title – doctor – as a sign of respect. In the family, community, and churches I was raised in, educators and ministers receive the utmost respect because of their service to the community. In my community, with a history of dehumanization (e.g., American Slavery, Jim Crow), it is disrespectful to call an elder by their first name. To be addressed by the title – doctor – is a sign of respect because it is a recognition of the triumphs and tragedies an elder has endured. An elder, in the Black community, may not have completed a doctorate, via formal education, and still be called doctor. To sit at the feet of the elders, listen to their stories, and learn from their wisdom, is a way of honoring them and the connectedness of our lives.

⁸ Freire (1970/2003), pp. 35-36, p. 52.

⁹ The International Literacy Institute. (1996). *Paulo Freire – An Incredible Conversation*. Video file. As I watched this interview, I listened for and was attentive to the ways Freire spoke of change and transformation. In listening to Freire, I was able to connect with other statements in his written works.

¹⁰ Freire (1985), p. 148.

I agree. I am grateful for this experience and this conversation. I greatly admire Paulo Freire for what he stands for. He, too, is a committed man, saturated in this real world.

To answer your question, Paulo was the one who initiated our first encounter. I came to Union Seminary in 1969, and at that time I hardly knew of him. I was not reading much about Latin American liberation theology but had heard of it; I did not read Spanish. And Gustavo Gutiérrez's book [*A Theology of Liberation*] had not been translated until 1973; I think it originally came out in 1971. About my second year at Union – around the time my book *A Black Theology of Liberation* came out – Paulo came to see me. I don't recall the exact time, but I know it was in the early seventies during the time I think he was teaching at Harvard. He came by because he largely wanted to congratulate me on my book *A Black Theology of Liberation*. I was so deeply moved because, by that time, I knew of him, although still had not read much from him. It was a deeply moving encounter right here at Union.¹¹

PF: [*As Dr. Cone speaks, Dr. Freire is nodding his head – affirming what is being said.*]

There are some books that so challenge and fascinate us that we cannot put them down until we reach the very last word. *A Black Theology of*

¹¹ In 2011, James D. Kirylo, author of *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife*, interviewed James H. Cone on the campus of Union Theological Seminary (New York City). Kirylo's text is considered one of the most comprehensive texts on the life and thought of Paulo Freire. The interview is chronicled in Chapter 8 of Kirylo's text. In referencing Kirylo, I am engaging area six of the exegetical research guide - referencing authors/communities who have engaged the text (and/or author of the text).

Liberation is one of those books. In 1970, when it had just been published in the United States, I received a copy while in Geneva. Cone was not unknown to me. I had read his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, and even though it lacked the formal qualities he later developed, it clearly distinguished him. That was the feeling I had had in 1969. I looked forward to *A Black Theology of Liberation* with ready expectations. Cone's clarity, his seriousness of analysis, and his commitment to the oppressed were no surprise to me – only confirmation of what I had come to expect.

I remember perfectly that I received my copy the day before a trip to Rome. At home that night after dinner, I began reading the book, carefully. I was spellbound page after page, not putting it down until the early morning and finishing it some hours later, en route from Geneva to Rome. When I returned to Geneva, I read it for a second time and then wrote to Cone, giving him my impressions and stressing the importance of its immediate publication in Latin America, because black theology, of which Cone was the foremost proponent in the United States, is unquestionably linked with the theology of liberation flourishing today in Latin American.¹²

OT: [*As I am listening, I am smiling thinking about the past and the present coming together.*]

¹² Freire wrote the foreword to the 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (Cone, 1986, p. vii) Without attending to the details of a text (area five of the guide), a reader may miss the intersections between texts and authors. I discovered this intersection between Cone and Freire through the research process.

As you were talking, I was thinking about the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. I was also thinking about the fact that the two of you, in different places, were reading one another's ideas about liberation. It is apparent that y'all connected around liberation theology and your commitment to the oppressed. It's also apparent that y'all wanted to change the world through education. Today, we are planning to march with the Poor People's Campaign, and it begs the question, what are the challenges we continue to face in the struggle for freedom?

In listening to you, it seems to me, Dr. Freire, that you read Dr. Cone's work as a teacher who anticipates the critical thinking of their student. Similarly, Dr. Cone embraced you as a student inspired by his teacher to claim his voice and deepen his knowledge of the world. In this way, I don't think it is a coincidence that I connected with the two of you, through your texts, in a teacher-student relationship.

I understand and appreciate what you said about reading books which fascinate and challenge, Dr. Freire. The first time I read each of your books, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, I was challenged, fascinated, and drawn in by the energy, the passion with which you expressed your ideas.¹³ The first time I encountered *God of the Oppressed*, Dr. Cone, I was

¹³ I am beginning to communicate *if I chose the text or if the text chose me*. Section I – *Selecting the Text* – of the exegetical research guide. For the reader, naming “if I chose the text or if the text chose me” is layered. It is layered because lived experience is layered. A text may “speak” in multiple ways, at different times, given the particular circumstances in life.

a student at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. The course was *History of Theology*. We read excerpts from various texts and one of the excerpts was from *God of the Oppressed*. I do not recall the exact reading, but I have been captured ever since. The first time I encountered *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I was a first year, first semester student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The course was *Planning & Managing Programming in Adult Education*. I remember the course vividly because, although your text was included on the syllabus, we, the class, did not discuss it. Thankfully, I read it.¹⁴

[*As I share my experience in the classroom at UNCG, my heart races, the hair on my arms stand-up, my voice deepens, and my tone is firm/resolute with a tinge of anger/disappointment.*]

To be honest, I did not read carefully the first time I read each text. However, there was something about each one that spoke to my soul and called my name. I cannot fully articulate how they called me, but I know why they called me. The two of you spoke to the suffering I experienced as a Black boy, who, at the age of five, had to ask my parents what the word *nigger* meant as I read it on the wall of Thomas' Garage.¹⁵ You spoke to what I have been

¹⁴ I will not forget the way I felt by the end of the course – *Planning & Managing Programming in Adult Education*. The professor may have been present in body, but he was absent in mind and heart. I was angry at the fact that he did not include *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in his lecture during the last two weeks of class. I was not alone in my anger. My classmates were angry as well. To be transparent, there were only four of us in the course. Only one of my classmates had been introduced to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in a different course. Yet, all of us felt we did not have a solid grasp on Freire's ideas, and we wanted our professor to engage the text.

¹⁵ In 1989, my sister, Melvina, and one of her friends, a white boy, were friends in our small town of Windsor, Bertie County, North Carolina. They were 12 and 13 years of age. After school, the school bus driver would drop them off at my dad and grandad's garage (Thomas' Garage). At the time, my parents did not know that the young boy's father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The father learned that his son

wrestling with all of my life. That is: what does it mean to be Black, a member of an oppressed community, in a society that does not affirm my humanity? You spoke to my humanity, my somebody-ness, and reminded me that the struggle for freedom is long. You also reminded me that I come from a family and a people who have survived and learned to thrive in the midst of suffering. In reading your books, I was called to reflect, ask critical questions, listen, claim my voice, and act.

JC: *[As he talks, Dr. Cone's voice increases in volume and pitch. There is a tension in his voice.]*

Oliver, it sounds like you know something about being Black in America and the South. I, too, learned the meaning of the word *nigger* and the power of White Supremacy as a child. I wrestled with God about the oppression we experienced in Bearden. The pain of confronting Blackness as evil, in the United States, is a violent trauma that never leaves the psyche. As a result, I have for years been responding to Black pain and dehumanization.

OT: Yes! Yes! Yes!

PF: *[Dr. Freire pauses and nods to Dr. Cone before he speaks. He nods as to affirm what he has said, his feelings, and the tension he feels.]*

was friends with my sister. One night, the KKK broke into my dad's garage, painted nigger on the walls, damaged customers' vehicles, and broke-out windows to the garage. At home, my parents received a call and, on the other end of the phone, was a voice that told my parents this was a warning. Within two weeks, according to my parents, the young boy was withdrawn from school and sent to a boarding school. My dad filed a police report, but the police did not complete a thorough investigation.

Oliver, I feel the pain and tension you continue to carry in your body from your childhood. I know what it is to come face-to-face with the pain forced on you by someone, some institution. The pain of the violence can silence you without your conscious permission.¹⁶

The prophetic nature of both Black liberation theology and a theology of liberation in Latin America lies not merely in their speaking for those who are forbidden to speak, but, most importantly, in their side-by-side struggle with the silenced – so that the silenced can effectively speak the word that will revolutionize and transform the society that reduces them to silence. The dominated and the silenced classes can speak the word only when they take history into their own hands and dismantle the oppressive system that crushes them.¹⁷ It seems to me that you have chosen to speak the word and take history into your own hands.¹⁸

OT: Yes, I hope so!¹⁹ The more I read, reflect, and respond to the ideas you deposited in *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the more I realize that the relief of oppression is a life-long undertaking. In order to live the

¹⁶ In *Conversations with Paulo Freire* (1977), Freire described the bodily tension he experienced when he was arrested and imprisoned in 1964. He talked about not knowing what to do with his body when the police officer called his attention. He said he was afraid that if his body was relaxed, he would be perceived as being disrespectful. He said he was afraid that if he stood at attention the police officer would think he was being mocked. The experience forever shaped his psyche. *Conversations with Paulo Freire* (1977) is a video file copyrighted by the Alternative Schools Network.

¹⁷ Cone (1970/1986), p. viii.

¹⁸ The reader should recall here the earlier discussion of the banking model of education, in Chapter II. The students, the silenced, are socialized as passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge – the oppressor's knowledge. The students, the silenced, may be discouraged or encouraged by their experiences, to trust their own power, which effects their sense of agency.

¹⁹ There are times when I am unsure of the words I speak concerning justice and injustice. Nevertheless, I am driven by an internal gage that points me in the direction of freedom.

cause of liberation, I must be rooted in my historic reality, looking to the past for insight concerning the present. Moreover, I feel the teacher-student relationship is a site of struggle, revealing relations of power, which can hinder or help education as the practice of freedom.

PF [*Drs. Freire and Cone begin to speak in unison as a way of expressing solidarity and with one another, me (teacher), the community, and would be students.*]

JC: The oppressor-oppressed contradiction causes suffering. We are socialized by the oppressor's consciousness (outside of us), internalizing the oppressor's consciousness (inside of us), causing us pain. The pain of suffering and the violence of deadly ideologies are points of departure for critically naming, (re)naming, and transforming the world we live in.²⁰ The teacher, as liberation ethicists and theologian, is called to free their-self and struggle with their students to free themselves from mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical tentacles of oppression, which are personal and political.

[*Drs. Freire and Cone pause as they reflect on their lives. They have shared experiences.*]

We understand the pain and the tension you live with. We, too, have experienced many pains as people of color, marginalized and oppressed in our communities.

PF: Many people recall that I was exiled from my home country after the military coup. But, many people do not recall that I was not received with open

²⁰ Freire (1970/2003), p. 76 and Cone (1975/1997), p. 199.

arms when I returned home. There were academics who said I only returned to be a celebrity. As if my exile was of my choosing, returning to my home country meant I experienced suffering. Nevertheless, I committed myself to the people, to critical literacy, and conscientização.²¹

JC: One of the reasons I chose teaching was because my church thought my ideas were too radical for me to be ordained as a minister. Yes, eventually the church ordained me, but it was hard coming face-to-face with the reality that the very community I was fighting for and committed to did not accept me with open arms. Still, I did not allow this reality to keep me from serving my people in the cause of liberation.

OT: *[Before speaking, I look at Drs. Cone and Freire. I look at their faces, their hands, their bodies. I can see the years of struggling for liberation has taken its toll on their bodies. However, in their voices, I hear the strength, the resolve to continue fighting. I also feel the hope they continue to live with.]*

I recognize that the two of you have been struggling for many years. I know I am fairly young in the struggle...*[we laugh]*...but, I hear you asking me to consider this question: what have I learned from my struggle with students and others?

²¹ As I reflected on the number of years Freire was active in the cause of liberation, teaching students of different generations, I could not help but wonder how he was or was not received by the community. I included this word from Freire to highlight the reality that being committed to the people is hard work. Being committed to the people is one of the challenges to liberation because the people have been formed by ideologies which are detrimental to the betterment of all. In the exegetical guide, this is a part of how the author's life influences their writing (area three).

I teach students who identify as members of marginalized groups.²² I also teach students who are members of dominant groups, but many of them do not choose to name this reality. I used to struggle teaching students who - after weeks of being present to lessons on social stratification, class discussions that addressed sociopolitical structures of domination, and articles on the effects of these issues – were apathetic, indifferent, unmoved, or disinterested. But, with time and experience, I began to accept that converting to the cause of liberation is a movement, not a moment. And everyone will not choose the path of liberation.

I find that students have a hard time critically naming and (re)naming the world to transform it. Yet, I struggle with students to develop their sense of agency and communal responsibility because I understand that we are conditioned by our socialization. One of the reasons students struggle to name and (re)name the world is because they are not immersed in a critical reading of history. Very often, students do not read history, carefully, causing a disconnect between their present and our collective past. As a result, they struggle with the reality that poverty, racism, and other systems of oppression are constructed by human-beings.

In many instances, students resist conversations about power, privilege, and oppression. They say: “That’s old news” or “We live in a post-racial

²² As I respond, I am thinking – why pedagogy, why theology – as means of relieving oppression with people. I make sense of my questions/thoughts by reflecting and musing about textual discoveries (area seven). My horizon and the horizons of Cone and Freire are fusing as we dialogue.

society” or “I was not born with privilege” or “I did not create the problem so why do I need to fix it.” Ultimately, I think they struggle with critically analyzing the ways we participate in systems of oppression because it is jarring, anxiety producing, and overwhelming. The issues of the world seem too large to fix, so they retreat to a safe place where they can control the narrative and the situation. The world, loosely defined, can be their individual worlds, the world of the classroom, or our collective world - society-at-large.

It is hard teaching and living in a society, in a world that does not affirm the fullness of humanity by perpetuating systems of oppression. I have never posed this question to my students, but how can pain and violence be points of departure for transforming the world? In a sense, maybe my students could not perceive that pain and violence are points of departure. Maybe they want to avoid pain. I understand. Maybe the thought of identifying violence means they have to be responsible for the lives of others and they are not prepared to accept their responsibility. Are we to suffer for the sake of suffering, is a question I wrestle with, and is there a kind of suffering that is not the passive acceptance of domination?

Both of you have written that we can discover liberation in suffering.²³ You’ve written that the oppressed are called to the cause of liberation for ourselves and our oppressors.²⁴ As followers of Jesus, we claim that he was the

²³ Cone (1975/1997), p. 168.

²⁴ Freire (1970/2003), p. 42.

Suffering Servant²⁵ and because he was the Suffering Servant we must suffer as servants of humanity²⁶ and all creation. Honestly, I struggle and, in many ways, resist the idea that the oppressed are called to liberate our oppressors.

Why should I be concerned with oppressors? I can focus on the emancipation of my people without being concerned with the liberation of the dominant. Right? Every day, I read or listen to news regarding inequalities and inequities in North Carolina. Consider these statistics: North Carolina has a population of 10+ million; 21% of our children live below the poverty line (\$24,000 in a family of four); 14.4% of households experience hunger and food insecurity; nearly 23% of the population is without health insurance coverage; and nearly 5% are unemployed.²⁷ Pair these statistics with the intersecting oppressions of race/class/gender and we fall into the abyss.

Is it not enough that I teach through the lens of the oppressed, particularly Black people? Undoubtedly, I will be labeled racist, sectarian, unpatriotic, and unchristian for standing in solidarity with the oppressed in the United States. But, at this juncture, I am not concerned about labels and potential attacks on my character. On the one hand, I have been party to sustained attacks on the reputation and credibility of Black people. On the other

²⁵ Isaiah 53.

²⁶ Matthew 16:15-24.

²⁷ Talk Poverty (2018), Center for American Progress

hand, I follow the teachings of man who experienced character assassination and he was lynched²⁸ (crucified).

PF: *[As he speaks, Dr. Freire is raising his voice and sitting up in the seat. He is making gestures with his arms and his hands.]*

To the oppressor consciousness, the humanization of the *others*, of the people, appears not as the pursuit of full humanity, but as subversion. If the humanization of the oppressed signifies subversion, so also does their freedom; hence the necessity for constant control. In truth, the oppressed must be converted to the cause of liberation, freeing themselves and their oppressors, because the oppressors, conditioned by their socialization, cannot liberate us due to a love of death, not of life.²⁹ As the oppressed, in the old way of being, we live in the image of and according to the will of the oppressors. As people in the process of *conscientização*, the new way of being, we develop a critical awareness of our own consciousness and live in the permanent process of liberation. As people who experience the violence of oppression, the goal is not to become free of oppression in order to oppress the oppressors (and ourselves); rather, it is to experience a new way of being human, altogether. It is to live into the fullness of our humanity.

Jesus Christ loved the people and lived according to that love. I think our creative task is to make heaven here, and now. I ask – Why am I here? In asking

²⁸ Cone (2011).

²⁹ Freire (1970/2003), p. 45.

this question, I want to be consistent in my friendship with Christ. I want to live in a world that is easier for us to love. And, since I believe that Christ is the liberator of me, of us, I do not want to offend him. I do not want to deny our relationship.³⁰

JC: [*Dr. Cone has moved to the edge of the back seat. He has leaned forward to the point of being between Dr. Freire and myself.*]

To resist the idea of liberating the oppressor and continue to struggle with it is an act of faith! Jesus' presence in the experience of suffering liberates Black and other devalued people from being dependent upon the historical limitation of oppression for a definition of our humanity. Thus, allowing us to project a new knowledge of ourselves with imagination. Suffering to which we have been called is not a passive endurance of white supremacy, but rather, a way of fighting for freedom. Now, when I say white supremacy, I mean white people making all of the rules and regulations by which this country – the United States – is defined (historically, presently). White supremacy defines how the community and society are going to run, including the academy.³¹

³⁰ In the documentary *Finding Freire* (1996), George C. Stoney has a conversation with Freire in which they discuss what it is to *be* in the world, Freire's faith, Freire's relationship with Christ, and Freire's dream for the world.

³¹ In an interview, *A Conversation with James Cone*, Cone talks about the perpetual suffering caused by systems of injustice and White supremacy in the United States. He also talks about the ways White supremacy has shaped rules and regulations in other countries. As I listened to him, I was attentive to his words about how we, teachers and students, move toward liberation given our historical limitations. Yes, teachers and students, individuals and communities may suffer in the cause of liberation, but that should never mean that we accept suffering as a passive acceptance of the system as is. As I navigated the exegetical guide, I was processing the ways I have experienced and been influenced by suffering in my era (area four). *A Conversation with James Cone* is a video file copyrighted by the 38th Trinity Institute: National Theological Conference. (6, January 2014).

Suffering that arises in the struggle for liberation is liberating because Jesus is present, in our midst.³²

Black people, I contend, as God's Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity. Humanity's meaning is found in the oppressed people's fight for freedom, for in the fight for liberation God joins them and grants them the vision to see beyond the present to the future.

Although the continued existence of black suffering offers a serious challenge to biblical and black faith, it does not negate it. The reason is found in Jesus Christ who is God's decisive Word of liberation in our experience that makes it possible to struggle for freedom because we know that God is struggling too.³³

As teachers, theologians are instructors in the faith, clarifying its meaning and significance for human life³⁴. Whether the teacher approaches the classroom with an interpretation of Christianity as an act for the liberation of the oppressed or develops this interpretation through the process of consciousness-raising, their actions will be informed by their understanding of who God is and what God is doing in the lives of people, every day. What God has done and is doing to liberate the oppressed from injustice and oppression cannot be separated from the ethical question: what am I to do?³⁵. The reflections and actions of a

³² Cone (1975/1997), p. 178.

³³ Ibid, p. 178.

³⁴ Cone (1975/1997), p. 8.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 180.

theological educator are intricately connected to their awareness of God as the liberator of the oppressed.

PF: I argue that our historical vocation is to become transforming agents of social reality. It is a struggle to liberate ourselves and others from oppression; however, it is possible. It is possible when we are immersed in the complex forms of oppression, in our own context.³⁶ Do not be afraid to problematize your context even if students struggle. Through dialogue³⁷ with and among your students, it is possible to name complex forms of oppression when you problematize your context. With each student and each classroom experience, you will have to immerse yourselves in dialogue which fosters critical exploration of topics, promotes self-awareness, reminds students-teachers that they are not isolated thinkers, and emphasizes that one's words, one's actions have an impact on others.³⁸

OT: [*I pause to breathe, allowing words, feelings, emotions to rest in me.*]

Thank you! I am grateful for your wisdom!

I'm reminded of Hebrews, the new testament text. You know the text that reads, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great *cloud of witnesses*, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him

³⁶ Freire, (1974/2013).

³⁷ Freire (1970/2003), p. 67.

³⁸ Freire (1970/2003), p. 67.

he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.³⁹

The cloud of witnesses is made of those who have and will bear witness to the sin and violence of oppression. The cloud of witnesses is those whom we dialogue with about transforming the world. The sin is not hyper-individualistic, as many religious leaders have taught. Rather, the sin that easily entangles is the reality of systems, i.e., economic, political, religious, constructed by human-beings who do not value life.⁴⁰ Instead, they value power over people. Too, everything that hinders is connected to systems which cause marginalized communities (and individuals within these communities) to internalize their suffering and devalue their birthright to the fullness of our interdependent humanity.⁴¹ With Jesus' teachings and his life in community, we see a different way to live in the world. In opposition to sin, Jesus endured the cross and its

³⁹ Hebrews 12:1-3

⁴⁰ "The pursuit of full humanity cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore, it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while [they] prevent others from being so" (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 74). As I read, this is one of the quotes I included in my journal and added to the dry-erase board in my home-office. I cannot be authentically human if I prevent others from being authentically human. I will be processing this quote until the day I die.

⁴¹ "Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their unfitness" (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 49). As I read this quote, I was reminded of a number of students I have taught who did not believe/trust themselves. Too many students are convinced of their unfitness. I have experienced students who repeated, time and again, what other teachers told them – "you cannot write" and "you do not read well." By talking with and getting to know students, I learned that they internalized these sayings and, therefore, stopped being their inquisitive/creative selves, in the classroom. As I reflected, I was reminded of the power of words, phrases, ideologies, and the power of the teacher to do harm and/or liberate.

shame so that the oppressed could bear witness to systematic violence and run the race of freedom without losing heart.⁴² His death led to new life. His resurrection revealed to us that the old way, the way of oppression, is not fixed.

As I consider the fullness of humanity and this notion of the *cloud of witnesses*, I realize that not all witnesses will be Christian. If our cause is the fullness of humanity, then there will be witnesses who are Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Agnostic, Atheist, Nontheist, and others. We may not share a faith in Jesus Christ, but we share a faith in humanity and the possibility of our collective freedom. For me, this is a profound realization because my students will enter the classroom with diverse perspectives birthed from their lived experiences. Even if they are Christian, I cannot assume we read and interpret Scripture alike. However, if the relief of oppression is our focus, we will learn, together, how to bear witness as a community and as individuals. I find strength in knowing that there are liberationists who have gone before me, who surround me, and who will come after me that will continue to struggle for the fullness of our humanity!⁴³

[I pause because I have a break in my thought.]

⁴² As I converse with and respond to the texts (area seven), I am reflecting on textual discoveries in *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which shape the way I understand a particular new testament passage. For the reader, this is an example of the “reconstruction of the reader’s thinking” which Pokorny (2011, p. 184) articulates and a “fusion of horizons” which Gadamer (1975, pp. 270-274) theorized.

⁴³ Here, I am reflecting on the relationship between historic realities – past/present – and future possibilities concerning the relief of oppression. Like Freire and Cone, I want to remain consistent in my relationship with Jesus Christ and fellow human beings as I experience the devastation of systems that oppress. As I stated at the beginning of this research journey, my dissertation is one story amidst innumerable stories striving against social injustice, advancing critical hope, and envisioning liberative educational gateways connecting historical realities with possibilities for critical change.

I want to return to the circumstances that brought the two of you together. Knowing how you are connected is important for understanding your history, your solidarity with one another as liberationists, and our collective struggle to change systems of oppression.⁴⁴

JC: Yes! Yes! Subsequent to our initial meeting at Union, I met Paulo while he was in Geneva, Switzerland, at the World Council of Churches (WCC), where he was working. The WCC had a five-day conference on black theology and Latin American liberation theology – speaking to the Europeans. Not only from that first encounter, but also from this encounter as well, I really fell in love with him. Of all the people from Latin America, he and I bonded quickly and easily. He understood race at a deep level. And even though we were doing slightly different things, he had a spirit about him that connected to my spirit. I got to know him quite well at that conference.⁴⁵

Subsequent to that time, I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and was deeply moved by it – *like you*. It was a major moment in my life. I went back to Geneva in the summer of 1974 and was a theologian-in-residence at the WCC. I was there for two months, and that is how we came to be really close friends and we would dialogue a lot. I finished writing *God of the Oppressed* while I was in Geneva. Paulo read several drafts of it.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ I am *placing the focus of my reading in its larger context* and responding to the question: *how does my focus relate to the author's full intent?* *Approaching the Text* – section II of the exegetical research guide.

⁴⁵ Kirylo & Cone (2011), p. 196.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 204.

OT: As I listen to you, I am reminded of the spring of 2017. At that time, I was enrolled in an independent study with Drs. Rochelle Brock, Veronice Miles, and Leila Villaverde.

PF: Who are they?

OT: Dr. Brock is a Black feminist scholar who specializes in critical pedagogy and urban education. She is one of my professors at UNC Greensboro. Dr. Miles is a Womanist scholar who specializes in the formative and transformative potential of preaching. She is one of my former professors from Wake Forest School of Divinity. Currently, she is the associate professor of preaching at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C. Dr. Villaverde is a Feminist scholar who specializes in feminist theories and critical inquiry/praxis. She, like Dr. Brock, is one of my professors at UNC Greensboro.

JC: So, how/why were you reminded of your independent study with these scholars?

OT: When I began my independent study, I told them I felt there was a connection between critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology. Moreover, I felt the connection between critical pedagogy and Black liberation theology was rooted in a deep connection between the two of you. Without an in-depth knowledge of your lives and your texts, I felt there was a theological grounding which inspired your pedagogy. The very titles of your books – *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *God of the Oppressed* – seemed to have connected the two of you. I wanted to discover, through my research, the relationship between you and the

impetus for your theological, pedagogical, and philosophical ideas.⁴⁷ They encouraged me to stay with this idea and my feelings.⁴⁸

As teachers and researchers, they encouraged me to embrace the fullness of this research opportunity by challenging me to ask how/why (re)connecting the two of you would shape my identity as a teacher, preacher, researcher, and agent of social change.⁴⁹ They represent a community of thinkers, namely Black women and Women-of-Color, who inform my epistemological and theoretical lenses.⁵⁰ The ways they critically analyze relations of power, positionality, forms of oppression, and the classroom are intricately woven into my comprehension of your texts. For example, in reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I engaged Darder around the idea of teacher-student as revolutionary partner⁵¹. In *The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Darder said, the teacher-

⁴⁷ I am responding to the question: *how does my life influence my reading?* *Being Interviewed by the Text* – section IV of my exegetical research guide.

⁴⁸ In reading *Sista Talk* and talking with Dr. Brock, I was called to my responsibility to care for students and the community from an Afrocentric perspective. As a Black woman who has experienced the sufferings of Black people, in the Black community, Dr. Brock is concerned with the mental/physical/spiritual well-being of the teacher/student/community. The Afrocentric perspective, rooted in the history of the African/American community, charges me to take up the responsibility of knowing myself and educating myself “from the inside” (Brock, 2010, p. 27). Knowing myself “from the inside” means being in tune with my whole body. It is connecting with my mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional self as a whole. In the words of Gloria Anzuldúa (1999), in *Borderlands/La frontera*, it is healing the split of the duality that is a part of my lived experience. It is the healing of the split between the mind and the body that I learned in the *formal* classroom, as a student. It is acknowledging that learning is an experience that happens “within the totality of [my] being” (Darder, 2002, p. 95).

⁴⁹ Black feminist, Womanist, Women-of-Color, and Feminist scholars are continually teaching me the ways my Black, male, heteronormative, educated body is implicated in systems of oppression and privilege (Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

⁵⁰ I am focusing on *referencing authors/communities who have engaged with the (primary) text(s)*. *Exploring What I have Heard in the Text* – section VI of my exegetical research guide. Scholars like Antonia Darder and Jaquelyn Grant read these texts and reflected on the ideas of Cone and Freire through their history, lived experience, and social context. Moreover, they added to the work of liberation by expanding the critique of systems that oppress. Without scholars like Darder, Grant, and others who offer a broader perspective on oppression and liberation, liberation for all would be limited.

⁵¹ Darder (2018), p. 114.

student as revolutionary partner engages *with* the student-teachers in a humanizing relationship that support their *mutual quest* for liberation. This partnership also points to dismantling of an authoritarian and alienating intellectualism⁵². She continues by stating that, based on your argument, Dr. Freire, revolutionary partnerships between teachers and students can only generate liberating praxis when there exists a profound trust in people and their creative power⁵³.

Similarly, in reading *God of the Oppressed*, I engaged Grant around the idea of tri-dimensional oppression⁵⁴. In *Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology*, Grant says, Tri-dimensional reality holds that full human liberation cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of any one form of oppression⁵⁵, i.e., classism or racism. For women, particularly women of color, tri-dimensional reality encompasses race/sex/class⁵⁶. Today, a term which is familiar to many, which communicates tri-dimensional reality from a sociological perspective is intersectionality⁵⁷.

You've said, Dr. Cone, we're always finding a new language to speak an old gospel.⁵⁸ Drs. Brock, Miles, and Villaverde, very familiar with *Pedagogy of*

⁵² Ibid, p. 114.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 114.

⁵⁴ Grant (1993), p. 277.

⁵⁵ Grant (1993), p. 277.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 277.

⁵⁷ Hill-Collins (2009), p. 7.

⁵⁸ Kirylo & Cone (2011), p. 202.

the Oppressed and *God of the Oppressed*, are a part of our conversation notwithstanding the fact that they are not physically present.

PF: I plant my roots so firmly in the present that I can make use of the past to foresee the future.⁵⁹ Your teachers wanted you to be firmly rooted in the present so that when you read our texts you would be able to foresee future possibilities concerning your ideas.

OT: Yes, that's right. And, in reading Black feminist, Womanist, and other Women-of-Color scholars, who have critically engaged your work, I am better able to grasp our interdependence as teachers, students, co-constructors of knowledge, and agents of theological/social change.

JC: We wrote our texts, within our context, through the lens of our lived experiences. I wrote through the lens of race. Paulo wrote through the lens of class. Yet, we understood that the relationship between power and oppression was far more complex. Black women, Women-of-Color, and Feminists critiqued our ideas and expanded the cause of liberation through the lens of their lived experiences.⁶⁰ Likewise, others who experience subjugation such as members of the LGBTQIA community, have done the same. If we are to actualize the fullness of our humanity, our liberation, we must see God in our own bodies and the bodies of others. We have come a long way in our critical analyses of race,

⁵⁹ (Darder, 2018, p. 161). Antonia Darder interviews Paulo Freire's wife, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, in *The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The interview is transcribed in Chapter 4. To gain a deeper appreciation for Freire's life, I recommend reading the interview in its entirety.

⁶⁰ Cone (1975/1997).

class, and gender. However, we have not come a long way in our relief of oppression because it's worse for people at the bottom.⁶¹

OT: As I remember my independent study, reflect on the research process, and converse with you, I think it is necessary for me to say more about how/why I chose you as my teachers.⁶²

When I began my journey as a doctoral student, I wanted to connect with thinkers who lived their lives and their faith in critical ways. To say it differently, I wanted to study educators who were ministers and freedom fighters. I wanted to study educators who were ministers and freedom fighters because I am a minister, educator, and freedom fighter. I did not want to choose one or the other calling. Thankfully, Black history/experience have taught me that I do not need to choose one or the other.

For some time, I have struggled with being a doctoral student, dwelling in the halls of the academy, and writing a dissertation. I have struggled because,

⁶¹ In his interview of James Cone, Kirylo asked, "How far have we come regarding race relations, and how far do we still need to go?" (2011, p. 210) Cone responded by naming the ways Black people are free from Slavery and Jim Crow, but he also highlighted the relationship between race and class oppression, in the United States, by claiming that *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), by Michelle Alexander, reveals how far we still need to go. The new Jim Crow is a continuation of the Jim Crow of the 19th and 20th centuries. Mass incarceration is indicative of the history of slavery, the 13th Amendment, and public policies designed to keep certain groups of people at the bottom. If the group is not Blacks, then it is immigrants. If the group is not immigrants, then it is women. If the group is not women, then it is same-gender-lovers. As a country, the United States repeats cycles of classicism, racism, sexism and other *isms* with each generation.

⁶² For teachers and students, it is important to name the reasons we do or do not engage certain thinkers. In the academy and the theological classroom, we claim the space as a place for the sharing of ideas. However, education is not objective. Education is political. And many ideas are oppressive. As many ideas are oppressive, so are the thinkers who purport these ideas. In (de)constructing the ideas which circulate in any classroom, particularly the theological classroom, we must (de)construct the thinker and the context in which they constructed their thought.

on the one hand, I want to be in the street, protesting alongside the people. On the other hand, I have struggled because, through this process, I'm trusting that I'm living my calling as a critical educator, theologian, and public intellectual. With the North Carolina General Assembly unwilling to expand Medicaid, immigrants and refugees being held at ICE Detention Centers, and the United States Congress struggling to impeach the 45th president, I want to participate in and organize counter-movements – daily. Yet, I trust that being/becoming a critical educator, theologian, and public intellectual is an important part of the struggle for liberation.

In a conversation with Dr. Cornel West regarding *Black Prophetic Fire*, Dr. Cone, you said something that has been engraved in my mind and in my heart. You said, the vocation of the intellectual is to: 1) let suffering speak, 2) let the victims be visible, and 3) let social misery be put on the agenda of those in power.⁶³ I hear the voices of the suffering when I read *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I see the oppressed in your context. I see the oppressed in my community. I know that you have determined to put social misery on the agenda of those in power. I am listening as you invite me to do the same!

I chose the two of you because you speak to suffering in our society, the church, and the classroom. Not only that, I believe you offer wisdom concerning

⁶³ Leigha Cohen Video Production. (2014). *Dr. Cornel West & James H. Cone: Black Prophetic Fire*. Video file.

the relief of oppression and the cultivation of agents of theological and social change, which teachers and students can learn from. With each work, there are lines that I sit and ponder as I consider the process of becoming/being an agent of theological/social change. For example, In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, you wrote, conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth which breaks with patterns characteristic of banking education⁶⁴ and fulfills, in part, critical education as the practice of freedom⁶⁵. And, In *God of the Oppressed*, you wrote, the task of the theologian is to probe the depths of Scripture exegetically for the purpose of relating that message to human existence⁶⁶ and clarify its significance as a teacher⁶⁷.

PF: [*Dr. Freire pauses. He leans forward. He looks out the window as if looking back in time and gathering his thoughts at the same time.*]

Wisdom has taught me that being/becoming a teacher, among the people, is a process which involves deconstructing the ways I reflect structures of domination. Knowing the realities of intersecting oppressions, the challenge of changing systems of oppression, and wanting people to change is not enough to transform the teacher-student, oppressor-oppressed contradiction. I cannot function as an authoritarian leader or teacher, dispersing all knowledge and making all decisions as if the people/students are ignorant and devoid of

⁶⁴ Freire (1970/2003), p. 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 67.

⁶⁶ Cone (1975/1997), p. 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

knowledge. To do so is to behave like the oppressor. As a teacher, I constantly examine myself, my motivations, and my actions in relation to my students. The teacher who claims to be devoted to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with their students is self-deceived. Students discover the relationship between the classroom and the society in-which-it-is-embedded as they discover the oppressed-oppressor contradiction within.⁶⁸

OT: If I understand you, then, as I have been shaped by the structures of the academy, the church, and the society, determined by the dominant class, I must submit to a process of conversion which calls me to name the internalized images of domination so that, in naming the images, I can break the teacher-student, oppressor-oppressed contradiction.

PF: Yes!

OT: And invite students to do the same?

PF: Yes! When people are already dehumanized, due to the oppression they suffer, the process of their liberation must not employ the methods of dehumanization.⁶⁹

OT: So, knowing that me and my students enter the theological classroom conditioned by dominant cultural, political, and theological ideologies, I have to participate in a process of reflection and action which confronts our historic reality.

⁶⁸ Freire (1970/2003), pp. 37-47.

⁶⁹ Freire (1970/2003), p. 53.

PF: Certainly!

JC: As a teacher, the theologian clarifies the meaning of faith for our daily lives.⁷⁰ The concreteness of everyday life means we cannot separate our focus on the social context from our questions about Jesus Christ and God.⁷¹ As such, the theological educator must ask several questions when approaching the classroom:

- What is the connection between life and theology?
- How does one interpret the gospel amidst a dominant theological ideology?
- How do we interpret Jesus Christ as we grasp the relationship between the struggles of the past and the present?
- How do we teach a liberation theology in a classroom shaped by traditionalism?
- How does the teacher live as a prophetic witness in the theological classroom and the community?

OT: In other words, the critical liberative theological educator, along with their students, is discovering, (re)discovering, and envisaging the connection between political praxis and the Christian faith.

JC: Yes! Our calling is derived from the people who have been through the trials and tribulations of this world. Our task is to interpret their struggle in the

⁷⁰ Cone (1975/1997), p. 8.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 99.

light of God's presence with them, liberating and thus reconciling the oppressed to themselves and to God.⁷² We are not called to interpret the gospel in a form acceptable to oppressors.

OT: As I receive and perceive your teachings, we, theological educators and students, have to name political/social maneuverings, being played out on the local and national stage, which keep people oppressed and corrupt the gospel of liberation! Our task is to employ a problem-posing education, in the theological classroom, which invites students to problematize dominant ideologies that operate within/without Christianity.

We must name, for example, that it is not a coincidence that voter suppression, gerrymandering, Voter ID, HB2, and other discriminatory laws were ushered in, in record time, in North Carolina, in the last ten years. The religious political right movement, which has been operating for nearly 40 years, is driving these policies and the politicians maintaining its ideology. Fortunately, there are teachers, preachers, and politicians who are challenging these policies through protest, lawsuits, movements, sermons, and curricula. However, the "New Religious Political Right," which formed as a Republican strategy to rival the African-American constituency in the Democratic Party, is constantly asserting that the *right* Christians are *Evangelicals*.

To be an evangelical, based on the definition of the new religious political right, is to uphold Christian values associated with conservatism,

⁷² Cone (1975/1997), p. 225.

patriotism, and nationalism in the United States. Their definition of *evangelical* describes a political bloc of voters and operatives indicative of a dominant, White, socio-theological ideology which has existed since the colonization of these lands by Europeans. It is an ideology which minimizes, silences, dehumanizes, and terrorizes. As a counter-movement, the critical liberative theological classroom must be envisioned as a space for identifying normative aspects of cultural, economic, political, theological, and social typologies that minimize the oppressed or erase our contributions as threats to the United States. To problematize the word *evangelical* and trace its history, for example, is to (re)discover its root in the Scripture and its meaning – “God’s good news” – proclaimed according to Luke 4:18–19.

So, as I approach the critical liberative theological classroom, I have several guiding questions to consider:

- What is the relationship between students’ lives and their theological interpretations, conditioned by dominant ideologies?
- How does our knowledge of history and lived experience inform our understanding of the relationship between *everyday* life and theology?
- In what ways does the teacher-student, oppressor-oppressed contradiction shape our theological worldviews?
- How does the banking model of education function in the theological classroom?

- What is the curricular relationship between problem-posing education, biblical interpretation, and theology?
- How do we live our faith in humanity and/or our Christian faith and our political praxis?
- How do my actions, as a teacher, communicate the love I have for humanity, particularly my students?

I want to return to a word you used, Dr. Freire. You said, “Wisdom has taught me that being/becoming...is a process” of reflection and action. The word is wisdom...

[We see organizers asking participants to line-up to march. Our dialogue has not ended, but it is time to reflect and act with others toward the relief of oppression, in the praxis of liberation.]

Freire, Cone, and Wisdom: An Expanding View of Liberation

The research process which resulted in an interpretive, imaginative dialogue has caused me to re-consider, re-think my expectations as a teacher and as a person-in-the-world. My conversation with Freire and Cone has opened-up my life world because I have experienced new horizons of critical inquiry, reflection, and praxis. In short, our dialogue has allowed me a deeper understanding of liberation as a process with a long history, which continues with me. As a result, I affirm the wisdom of communion with others (e.g., students, teachers, oppressed, oppressors, liberationists) as paramount to transforming structures of domination. I discovered, through this hermeneutic encounter, the fusion of my horizon with their horizons of hope in humanity. Summarily, I

acknowledge that transformation is not the “job” of a central leader (e.g., teacher), but the responsibility of a community (e.g., theological classroom) that accepts the cause of liberation.

The wisdom one gleans from a conversation with Paulo Freire and James H. Cone, concerning a critical liberative theological consciousness, is an invitation to take “the [road] less traveled” (Frost, 1992, p.163) in a world conditioned by domination. It is an invitation to submit one’s self to a process of converting from an “old way” to a “new way” of being, altogether. It is an invitation to transform relations of power by naming realities of injustice, analyzing realities of injustice, building critical community as a response to injustice, and acting to improve unjust conditions for *all* life.

We are formed and (re)formed by structures of domination that are powerful and complex. The powerful want the masses to think that change is impossible. So, too, the powerful want the victims of systemic violence to be afraid of political, theological, and social analysis. If fear of change is sustained, it leads to despair. If despair is sustained, it leads to death (literal, figurative). A reader may experience a change in their attitude or disposition concerning structures of domination by coming closer to Freire and Cone through the hermeneutic encounter. If a reader lives with fear, for example, they will encounter the hope of Cone and Freire. By encountering Freire and Cone they will discover that liberation is grounded in hope. It is grounded in hope *for* change that leads *to* change through critical consciousness-raising.

In his text, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), Marcus Borg defines two types of wisdom: conventional and subversive/alternative. Conventional wisdom is

the most common type of wisdom because it is the “mainstream wisdom of a culture” (pp. 69–70). It is a culture’s construal of reality and how to live.

Conventional wisdom is a culture’s most taken-for-granted understandings about the way things are (its worldview, or image of reality) and about the way to live (its ethos, or way of life). It is “what everybody knows” – the world that everybody is socialized into through the process of growing up. It is a culture’s social construction of reality and the internalization of that construction within the psyche of the individual. (p. 75)

In other words, conventional wisdom is the dominant consciousness, the dominant ideology. However, subversive/alternative wisdom questions and challenges conventional wisdom.

Teachers of subversive/alternative wisdom teach of another way to live, to make meaning of life, to see and imagine a *new* reality. In the new testament, Jesus is a teacher of subversive/alternative wisdom. “As a teacher of wisdom, Jesus was not primarily a teacher of information (what to believe) or morals (how to behave), but a teacher of a way or path of transformation” (Borg, 1994, p. 75). Jesus questioned and challenged the conventional wisdom, of his day, which created hierarchies and boundaries among people. He questioned and challenged the conventional wisdom of the political and religious establishment. As a young, single, Jewish, man, he surrounded himself with the “least” in his community and he taught them the path that leads to life (Matthew 25:20–46). Yet, his teachings were not for the “least” only. He taught anyone, any teacher, any community that would listen to the call to oppose dominant ideologies that perpetuated pain, violence, and death (e.g., emotional, physical, psychological, political, theological, social).

Fundamentally, wisdom is about how to live justly. There is a wise way to live and there is a foolish way to live, according to the ancients (Borg, 1994). More concretely, there is a way to live that leads to the fullness of life and there is a way to live that leads to death. Freire and Cone, in the likeness of Jesus, were teachers of subversive/alternative wisdom. They were teachers of *critical* wisdom. They taught anyone who might tend to the path that leads to the fullness of life, the fullness of humanity. They questioned and challenged a conventional wisdom which teaches us to maintain hierarchies and boundaries, uphold the notion that superiority and inferiority are natural, and preserve “law and order” at all cost. In short, the wisdom of Freire and Cone has taught us to (de)construct conventional wisdom so that an alternative wisdom might emerge for the envisaging of a new/different historic reality.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed and *God of the Oppressed* were written in solidarity with the silenced, marginalized, and dehumanized in our society. Freire and Cone began with their lived experience of oppression as they mapped social theories of change that would disclose structures of domination. By unveiling structures of domination, they wanted to show both the causes of injustice and what must be done to eliminate it. They wrote these texts as pathways to the fullness of life. As I perceive it, their faith in Jesus Christ, in justice, and in equality propelled them to act as agents of theological/social change for the cause of liberation. And their praxis has called me to do likewise.

CHAPTER V

UNTESTED FUTURITY: TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL LIBERATIVE THEOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that [humanity] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from [humans]. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract [humans] nor the world without [humanity], but [humans] in their relations with the world. In these relations, consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 69)

[Theologians] often tell us about the books that are similar and not so similar to their perspectives, but seldom do they tell us about those nonintellectual factors that are decisive for the arguments advanced on a particular issue. More often than not, it is a theologian's *personal* history, in a particular sociopolitical setting, that serves as the most important factor in shaping the [approach] and content of [their] theological perspective. (Cone, 1975/1997, p. xix)

Undetermined Feasibility: A Theoretical Framework in the Making

Reflecting on the Research Process

Cone (1975/1997) wrote, “Human beings are made for each other and no people can realize their full humanity except as they participate in its realization for others” (pp. xii–xiii). A “new” traditionalism, conservatism in North Carolina and the United States is striving to silence critical voices in our communities, on university campuses, and in classrooms of various disciplines, which is circumscribing the realization of our full

humanity. A focused examination of the “new” traditionalism, conservatism reveals an old reality. This old/new conservatism is rooted in White supremacist ideology. It is a link in the historic chain of White, male, heteronormative, nationalistic, capitalistic, dominance that claims, too often, to be Christian in its pursuits. In order to combat this “new” traditionalism, so as to realize our full humanity, there is a continuous need for critical education as a social justice response to economic isolation, political marginalization, and systematic oppression via the critical liberative theological classroom.

Throughout this research project, notions of agency, liberation, and the relief of oppression have inhabited my thinking, reading, and interpretive lenses. What does it mean to live freely or be free in a social context that reifies systemic/systematic oppression? How do I, as an educator, student, and researcher, participate in social and theological transformation? What does the process of liberation “look like” according to Paulo Freire and James H. Cone? How do students and teachers, within the theological classroom, engage social and theological systems that maintain and/or repudiate oppression? These are a few of the questions that have reverberated in my being as I have endeavored to glean wisdom from Freire and Cone as well as grasp the possibilities for a critical liberative theological consciousness/classroom/education.

I have shown, with this research project, that: Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a way of inviting teachers/students to a process of reflection, action, and transformation which confronts our historic reality; Cone wrote *God of the Oppressed* to tell the story of Black people’s struggle for liberation amidst White supremacist

ideologies which constructed inhumane realities in the name of God; and an imaginative dialogue can provide an opening to the critical interpretive process so as to lay bare the interconnectedness between history, text(s), lived experience (author, reader), social context (past, present), and the possibilities for new/different horizons concerning sociopolitical realities. As I conclude this study, I wish to reflect on my approach to examining the authors while laying a foundation for *A Pedagogy of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness*.

“More often than not, it is a theologian’s *personal* history, in a particular sociopolitical setting, that serves as the most important factor in shaping the [approach] and content of [their] theological perspective” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. xix). Cone focused on theologians, but his thought moves beyond theologians to pedagogues and others. In fact, as a minister and educator, my personal history is the central factor which shapes my approach and the content of my theo-pedagogical perspective. I cannot separate my life as a Black man from my life as a teacher, a minister, and a researcher. I began this research project with stories, in different sociopolitical contexts, which have shaped my perspective on the relationship between the world and the theological classroom. The story of my ancestors, Christopher Columbus, founders of the United States, the Puritans, Jesus of Nazareth, my educational experiences, and the educational experience of my student are all stories that shaped the lenses through which I approached *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*.

What I have come to know and understand about the relationship between history, the aforementioned stories, and these particular texts is that they form my consciousness.

The stories contextualized my reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, adding meanings, offering revelations, and critical epiphanies. Equally, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed* questioned my reality, challenged the stories that shaped me, and altered my lenses. In short, as a participatory reader with a unique history and a co-constructor of knowledge (with Freire and Cone), this research project has become a complex, layered story through which one might ask critical questions regarding the stories that shape us, the stories we live, the stories of others, and the stories that might shape a critical liberative theological consciousness/classroom.

I enter the theological classroom with a history of dehumanization, marginalization, and isolation. And, I am not alone. For women, LGBTQIA, differently abled, poor, and fellow marginalized groups, the academy mirrors the oppressive systems working against us, in society. With this sociopolitical reality, I navigate texts (e.g., media, narrative, nonfiction, prose, pedagogy, scripture, theology). Without a critical educational process that tends toward emancipation, the process and cause of liberation becomes far more daunting, overwhelming, and possibly paralyzing. I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed* with the thought that these writings have something to say about liberation on an individual, communal, and societal level.

In approaching *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *God of the Oppressed*, I moved beyond a surface reading of the words to a deeper engagement with the authors, their lived experiences, and their history with systems of oppression. In so doing, I was invited to critically engage my lived experiences, history with systems of oppression, and consider how students might do the same. Likewise, by increasing my knowledge of

other critical pedagogical and liberative theological texts, I was able to consider more broadly how interpretation (meaning making) is garnered through the historic emotional/mental/physical grid of our lived experiences as members of marginalized or dominant groups. Thus, the acts of reading, (re)reading, reading history, and reading the present have shaped/(re)shaped the grid of my consciousness - throughout this project.

As I read, I employed a critical exegetical research guide and historical criticism, as methods, to exegete (peel back the layers of) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *God of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, and James H. Cone. In the process of exegeting these texts and authors, I found that reading critically opened the door to a critical read of the self (Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003; Gadamer, 1975; Pokorny, 2011; Malcolm, 2018; Miles, 2009). In other words, as I exegeted the texts, I also exegeted myself. I discovered, in a new/different/transformational way, Freire's poignant words: "Only as [the oppressed] discover themselves to be hosts of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their [liberation]" (1970/2003, p. 33). I read with multiple lenses and varied histories that I needed to peel back the layers of. So, too, do students who enter the theological classroom because they enter with varied histories and multiple lenses.

As I read, I isolated paragraphs, sentences, and words in order to attend to the details of each text, which led to exploring questions concerning the authors, their lived history, their ideas, their ideas in relation to students, their ideas in relation to teachers, and the mutual process of transitioning from an old to a new way of being-in-the-world. As I isolated the readings, I thought about the questions the texts were asking me to consider and the way(s) violence (as a lived experience in our society), for example, is

shared by Cone, Freire, and potential students. In so doing, I situated the focus of my reading within the focus of the authors' full intent, namely liberation from all forms of oppression/violence/suffering. The journal entries I present in Chapter IV demonstrate this process.

My imaginative dialogue with Freire and Cone is an example of what is possible when reading through a critical exegetical lens. A critical exegetical lens invites the reader to read their life as they read a text in order to experience something new/different/transformational (Long, 2005; Malcolm, 2018; Miles, 2009). The critical exegetical process offers the reader a way to grasp how the world is formed (i.e., socially constructed), how they have been formed by the world, and how they might (re)form/(trans)form the world on an individual, communal, or societal plane.

By peeling back layers of my history and lenses, I began to name my identity markers. In naming these markers, I began the process of grasping the ways I have been conditioned by the world and the ways I have been conditioned to read the world. I am a Black, cis-gender, educated, male, teacher and Christian (Protestant, Baptist) minister, from a working-middle class family, who grew up as the youngest of three children with a single mom (for the majority of my youth). I do not come to a text as a "blank slate." In truth, no one comes to a text and reads it as a "blank slate." Readers, both students and teachers, alike, approach texts with prejudices or preconceived notions based on their lived experiences and socialization (Byrne, 2001). I cannot remove these markers, but I can identify them in order that I might peel back the layers of my existence (reality) in order to critically re-create my existence on an individual, communal, and societal tier.

Similarly, students developing a critical liberative theological consciousness while learning to name their identity markers are better equipped to dialogue with a text because being aware of their preconceived notions, based on their socialization, enhances their capacity for critical understanding.

In their childhood, Cone and Freire were formed by experiences of poverty, racism, and religion. As educators, they entered their metaphorical and real classrooms with a lived history of dehumanization, marginalization, and isolation. As a result, their theo-pedagogical praxis and strive for liberation were products of their formation in the world. Exegeting *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *God of the Oppressed*, and other texts (by and/or about Freire and Cone and their works) exposes the reality that they had been reading/questioning the world for many years. Prior to teaching, writing, and engaging the world as public intellectuals, Freire and Cone questioned the ways they (and their communities) were or were not allowed to live into the fullness of their humanity. In short, before Freire and Cone began to read texts on critical theory and theology, for example, they were already reading the world and their lived experiences as texts.

I began this research project reflecting on a teaching experience with a particular student, in a particular classroom. As I (re)consider where I started, I recognize that I initially read Cone, Freire, and others with the assumption that I would find the solution to my student's problem. As I perceived it, my student's problem was their lack of liberative thinking. I asked myself: how do I fix my student's reality? By asking myself this question, I also thought I had a problem. So, I wondered: how do I teach a critical way to read theo-social realities? My problem, as I perceived it, was an inability to "fix"

the student's thinking. As arrogant as my thinking was, it was true at the time. I was determined to fix it, but now I see other ways of helping students cultivate their critical awareness and thinking abilities.

Through the research process, I have found Thiselton's words to be true: "The very process of reading may lead to a re-ranking of expectations, assumptions, and goals which readers initially bring to texts" (as cited in Malcolm, 2018, pp. 79–80). The very process of reading challenged me to re-consider my assumptions and led me to realize, more acutely, that the notion of "fixing" my student was connected to a socio-historic conditioning. I was reading my student through a deficit lens and, as her teacher, I assumed a position of authority (power) over her. My conditioning was linked to a notion of being "fixed" or needing to be "fixed" as a form of domination in the United States (Cone, 1975/1997; Floyd-Thomas, 2006; Hill-Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994; Johnson, 1997; Spring, 2011).

In a different, but related way, the process of reading critically prompted me to acknowledge that I have been questioning my lived experiences and the world, since I was a child. Prior to teaching, writing, and participating in the world as a social justice activist/educator, I questioned the ways my community and I have been deterred from living into the fullness of our humanity. I now understand, with critical wisdom, that any solutions to the problems of sociopolitical misery are garnered through a process which necessitates the (de)construction/(re)construction of myself in relation to students (and publics) who have been conditioned by theo-social systems of oppression. It is a

continual process of learning new/different ways of transforming socio-political realities by way of the critical liberative theological classroom.

As a Christian minister, within a tradition that does not collectively affirm women or LGBTQIA persons in ministry, I have been conditioned by dominant ideologies. As a 35-year-old male, shaped by notions of Black masculinity, I have been conditioned by my presence in a dominant group. As an educated-educator, I have been conditioned by the elitist mentality, shaped by a dominant ideology, in the academy. As a teacher, I have been conditioned by the purposes/goals/ends of education, but not so much by the process of (de)constructing the teacher-student contradiction. So, if in the process of reading, (re)reading history, and critically exegeting texts, I uncovered layers of my conditioning through self-exegesis, then students can learn to do the same by using the critical exegetical research guide. In so doing, students might discover new/different/transformational ways to strive toward individual, communal, and societal liberation. Therefore, the first step in laying the foundation for a critical liberative theological pedagogy is the teacher's readiness to (de)construct their theo-pedagogical motivations, lay bare a process of (de)construction in dialogue with their students, and (re)consider the ways social formation shapes their lenses, by way of lived experience.

As participatory readers of texts, students/teachers who read the world, and teachers/students who are read by the world, we may be unaware of the ways we have been conditioned. Although cultural, economic, racial, ethnic, educational, historic, political, religious, and social experiences shape the ways we interact with texts and the world, the process of learning to critically engage this reality is a process of learning to

critically question our “blind spots.” Immersed in her community, church, family, and a particular Christian tradition, my student, who perceived the Bible as the foundational text for the social contract in the United States, was shaped by her religio-cultural and socio-political realities. In other words, her participation in the world determined her reading of the Bible and her reading of the Bible determined her participation in the world. In this way, she and I were not different because she was reading through lenses and a mental grid which formed her interpretation. The student’s interpretation of the Bible was shaped by dominant ideologies, but I had not invited the student to a process of liberation which involved both of us exegeting our social conditioning. Specifically, I did not provide my student with a “road map,” if you will, for questioning the text, questioning their self, questioning the historic context, questioning the author, and identifying the lenses through which they read. Neither did I use my lived/learning experience(s), with the process of critical exegesis, as an example. I submit that I and my student would have benefitted from the integration of critical exegesis and historical criticism to analyze our socially constructed worlds (e.g., individual, communal, religious).

The critical exegetical research guide, whether it is charted linearly or non-linearly, invites students and teachers to a process of uncovering the layers of a text, uncovering the layers of their stories, reflecting on the implications of the text alongside their stories, and theorizing ways the text, through the lenses of the readers, might communicate something new/different/transformational about current realities. A student, for example, may cultivate their power to ask critical questions of themselves and a text

by first asking, *how does my life influence the way(s) I read?* Following the critical exegetical research guide, linearly, a student does not have the opportunity to consider this question until area 4 – *being interviewed by the text*; however, if a student is invited to ask the aforementioned question, as they begin to read a text, then the student might wonder about the significance of their lived experience(s) and their relationship to a text(s).

Initially, a student may not conceive of the “blind spots” which influence their mental grid and reading praxis, but the aforementioned question invites them to uncover their personal history as they uncover the history of the text being read (Cone, 1975/1997). It is in wondering about one’s life that the door of possibilities opens to an exegesis of the self and a close (critical) reading of a text. In a different, but related way, by invoking the question at the beginning of the educational process, it offers an opportunity for the students and the teacher to develop a relationship by way of lived experience and communal history. In part, students develop their sense of agency by sharing their knowledge (lived history), learning from the history of others, and the educational practices of their teacher. In the theological classroom, students can be encouraged, challenged, and/or discouraged to co-construct knowledge through their relationship with their teacher and fellow classmates. By way of dialogue, reflection, critical inquiry, and action, the teacher demonstrates that they do or do not trust their student’s ability to reason with a text, themselves, and others (Freire, 1970/2003). In sum, the teacher-student relationship is a critical element in the liberatory process of cultivating students as agents of theological and societal change because students learn

with their teacher how to (de)construct their mental grid and peel back the layers of sociopolitical realities.

Because students enter the theological classroom with a diverse set of lived experiences and theological worldviews, it is important to build the teacher-student relationship by building community. Community building is a way for students to connect with one another and their teacher as they learn to critically engage the social world. I understand the critical theological classroom as a space where we, teachers and students, learn to participate in critical dialogue by deconstructing discourses, practices, and values that influence our individual as well as our communal experiences. Creating an environment that encourages dialogue allows students to share their lived and learning experiences as they uncover the layers of their story, in relation to the stories of others. Developing a classroom environment that centers dialogue is an important step in cultivating students critical awareness and consciousness because it is a process of inviting students to reflect on their lived history, name systems of inequity and inequality that encompass their lives, and discuss critical possibilities for transforming unjust individual/communal conditions (Darder, 2018; Freire, 1970/2003; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). By fostering dialogue, teachers challenge students to engage deeply with a text, themselves, others, and life beyond the classroom. Dialogue helps students learn to be/become accountable and responsible members of the classroom (i.e., community) as they learn to (de)construct/(re)construct their theo-social conditioning. Thus, the teacher-student relationship and community building are important elements of cultivating critical theological consciousness.

In the critical liberative theological classroom, posing the question, “How does my life influence the way(s) I read a text?” has the potential to disrupt a “banking model” of theological reflection, as it relates to biblical interpretation, by inviting students to peel back the layers of (i.e., critically question) their religio-cultural and socio-political formation (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 68). A banking model of theological reflection implies acceptance of doctrines and dogmas of Christianity, laced with dominant ideologies, without critical reflection. Or, accepting the teachings of pastors, theologians, and religious educators, who are shaped by dominant ideologies, without critical analysis. Students who enter the theological classroom enter having been shaped by doctrines of Christianity and systems of domination. In practice, it is traditionally assumed that a student who chooses to attend seminary/divinity school intends to be a minister in the Christian church. However, in an age of religious and non-religious pluralism, not all students will be conditioned by doctrines of Christianity, although they may be influenced by Christian beliefs (e.g., the Good Samaritan ideal). Whether the student enters the theological classroom having been influenced by doctrines of Christianity or the student enters the classroom having been influenced by religious/non-religious pluralism, all students enter with lived experience(s) and a history of social formation.

Besides students, as teachers, theologians enter classrooms having been shaped by doctrines of Christianity, biblical interpretations, pluralism, systems of domination, lived experience(s), and a history of social formation. So, to cultivate a critical liberative theological consciousness/classroom, for students as well as teachers, the aforementioned question should be coupled with this driving question, *how does a banking model of*

education function in the formation of theological reflection and interpretation(s)? The coupling of these questions invites students and their teachers to participate in an educative process as subjects, which calls them to analyze their religio-cultural reality as individual/communal agents. By participating in this educative process, students and their teachers begin to (de)construct, uncover, peel back the layers of their collective and individual formation. To be clear, this critical educational process is lengthy, tedious, and sometimes paralyzing because students and teachers are exeging multiple layers of social conditioning which encompasses identity, family systems, theological beliefs, and emotional/mental/physical/spiritual mapping (i.e., meaning making), to say the least. Therein, the second step in laying the foundation for a critical liberative theological pedagogy is a process of disentangling theological interpretation(s) from social formation and a banking model of education so that students and teachers might act as conscious beings in order to (re)shape/(trans)form their theological perspective(s) – individually and communally.

I began this research project declaring that we live in the tension between the reality of oppression and the promise freedom. The tension is present in our daily lives because it is a part of the historic grid of the United States, North Carolina, universities, divinity schools, students, and teachers (even if we are not consciously aware of it). In the words of Cornel West (1999), “We are trapped in space and time” as we experience “unjustified suffering” in our communities and our world (p. 19). I remain arrested by the idea that a dominant social group would claim their privilege to be free while simultaneously participate in the oppression of a different group of people. The tension

between injustice, justice, subjugation, and liberation is capricious and multifarious, amid numerous sociopolitical conditions, shaping teachers, students, and theological classrooms. Therefore, understanding our individual/collective histories, the lenses through which we interpret, and naming our social realities are indispensable for transforming social misery.

Grasping the wisdom of Freire (1970/2003), the hope that endures and grounds a critical liberatory classroom is “the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love” (p. 24). Pursuing the wisdom of Cone, the charge that nourishes a critical liberatory theology is “an analysis of the gospel in light of the consciousness of [the oppressed] struggling for liberation” (1975/1997, p. 43). Unfortunately, as a microcosm of society, the academy breeds individualism. Students and teachers are socialized, trained, and encouraged to be “independent” (i.e., individualistic) researchers/thinkers/actors. As an educational practice, shaping students as individualistic thinkers undermines reflection, community building, consciousness-raising, and agency because it isolates students. In isolation, there is potential for the human spirit to be destroyed, which has a ripple effect on the community and society-at-large. Accordingly, the academy is complicit in the destruction of the community as well as individuals. Therefore, the vocation - prophetic calling - of the critical liberative theological educator, in the sociopolitical context of systematic/systemic oppression, is the cause of liberation by way of the classroom.

Hopkins (1999) wrote,

From the perspective of black liberation theology [...] theological education looks beyond the walls of the academy, historically truncated faith genealogies, contemporary institutional communities of believers, and the centering of the self

as the ultimate lenses of adjudicating reality. In other words, the aim, structure, and criteria of theological education arise from an analysis and experience of the movement for full humanity in the anthropological and ecological interactions in the world. (p. 42)

Expanding on Hopkins' thought, the critical liberatory theological classroom, with an intent to cultivate a critical liberative theological consciousness, invites students and teachers to engage the public so as to relieve *all* forms of social misery. In this way, the critical exegetical research guide presents students with an opportunity to participate in a "struggle to balance a communal connection of self, society, and creation" which is the cause of liberation (Hopkins, 1999, p. 42). As students uncover social realities through the critical exegetical process, they begin to uncover relations of power which have shaped their cultural, economic, religious, and social lenses. And, as students uncover relations of power, they begin to (re)imagine relational possibilities because they will be establishing their power to participate in social (re)construction and social transformation.

The critical exegetical research guide is helpful in learning to uncover power dynamics because, through a participatory process, it provides students as well as teachers with a question and a directive: *how am I influenced by my era?* and *explore what I have heard in the text*. With this question and this directive, students are challenged to move beyond self-referential notions of reality and engage *others* as they navigate relational power on individual, communal, and societal planes. In this way, students do not remain independent, isolated researchers/thinkers/actors. They are challenged to move beyond self-referential notions of reality. They learn to become

aware of their unconscious existence in the world. By way of the aforementioned question and directive, students learn to enter into a self-other dialogue.

The self-other dialogue has the potential to disrupt the unconscious existence of students and reorient them toward a critical awareness of the world. In the movement from unconsciousness to consciousness, students experience new horizons that influence the lenses through which they read the world, relate to the world, and participate in the world. I submit that, in the critical liberative theological classroom, students ought to be provided with a hard copy and an electronic copy of the critical exegetical research guide (reference Chapter I). Also, the guide might be included in the syllabus. As students learn to exegete texts, themselves, and social realities, a hard/electronic copy of the guide gives them an outline to go by, both communally and individually.

In community, with texts, authors, and others, students learn to reflect on their reality in relation to the reality of *others*. For the marginalized, systemic and systematic oppression are realities that must be relieved for the fullness of our humanity. For the dominant, systemic and systematic oppression are realities that must be relieved for the fullness of our humanity. For all of creation, systemic and systematic oppression are realities that must be relieved. As members of marginalized and dominant social groups, we are better able to respond to our sociopolitical contexts, in emancipatory ways, by becoming aware of our cultural, political, theological, and social formation, and reflecting on our formation. To such a degree, within our contexts, the onus of (re)forming/(trans)forming our historic present is within our power.

As a student of Cone, Freire, and contemporary liberationists, both pedagogical and theological, I envision a theological pedagogy of the oppressed via the critical liberative theological classroom. However, in dialogue with the evolution of their ideas concerning liberation, their stories, my story, and history, I recognize that the critical exegetical process is advantageous for theological and non-theological classrooms, alike. Thus, the third and final step in laying the foundation for a critical liberative theological pedagogy is fostering critical community so that students as well as teachers, within marginalized and dominant groups, might discover their power to transform systems of dehumanization and decreation within themselves, their relationships, their distinct classrooms, their unique communities, and our socially constructed world.

A Changing Perspective on Oppression and Liberation

As a community of critical pedagogical and theological educators concerned with agency, liberation, and the relief of oppression, our hopes, questions, disappointments, research, and actions are shared. And, it is through this sharing, that we live, thrive, and are sustained as teachers, students, members of our communities, and beings-in-the-world. We form, (re)form, and *are* formed by critical community as we seek to live, move, and have our being in religio-cultural and socio-political contexts that do not affirm the fullness of our humanity. We enact justice through dialogue, the sharing of meals, collective protest, singing, grief, poetry, and an agreement to live/laugh/love. In sum, community enacted within the academic setting, particularly the theological classroom, effects community beyond the academy.

The possibilities and limits of a critical liberatory theological pedagogy are formed and (re)formed by the students and teachers who inhabit the classroom (Denzin, 2007). For the theological classroom to be critical, it ought to be designed to engage lived histories, students, teachers, and texts in ways that challenge, question, resist, and subvert systems of inequality. This implies constantly learning, unlearning, thinking, and rethinking the socializing effects of schooling – outside and inside of the academic setting. The critical liberatory theological classroom is a *living* space because it is responding to the complexity of social realities. It is so because critical liberatory theological education “affirms [students/teachers] as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 72). And, a critical liberatory theological consciousness/classroom is alive, in a “state of becoming,” because relationships between teachers and students, students and communities, communities and individuals are multidimensional (Macedo, 2007). Therein, as a critical liberative theological educator, I assert that the intersecting points of departure for (de)constructing, (re)constructing, and envisaging the theological classroom are: a) the complex, diverse story of a marginalized community (e.g., Black, LGBTQIA+, Women) in the struggle for freedom in the United States, b) my multiplex history/experience in dialogue with the intricate storied history/experience of fellow marginalized persons, and c) Scripture with an emphasis on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Student Agency for Theological and Social Transformation

History, as I perceive it, is a story (or narrative). As a text, history is a story of social practices and socially constructed institutions. As such, our theories of the world

are intricately woven to our mental grids and interpretations, which have historic ramifications. Teachers and students, in the critical liberative theological classroom, are called to engage in a critical hermeneutic that “tries to make sense out of history and contemporary context without tying either to rigid theoretical foundations” (Noddings, 2016, p. 71). Without a critical knowledge of history, students remain objects in the metanarrative that is history. Yet, we make meaning and seek meaning, in both texts and life, as we live in the historic present (Noddings, 2016). With the application of historical criticism, students learn to analyze human institutions and social practices; thereby, studying history as a text that influences our personal and collective lives. In this manner, historical criticism “makes history intelligible and assessable, denoting its contemporary presence and significance” because “having ownership over the past links the self to others and vice versa, grounding the present with critical consciousness and the future with proleptic responsibility” (Villaverde, et al., 2006, p. 311).

History, as one of the major themes of Cone and Freire, shapes the consciousness of our existence. Our knowledge of history, both communal and personal, helps us combat stories that subjugate some while disproportionately empowering others. The history of domination and marginalization, in the United States, both present and past, is intricately connected to the history of individual members of dominant and marginalized groups. Knowing one’s personal and communal history is an integral part of the educative process, of naming the “historic present” (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 73) to oppose the “dominant material relations of the ruling theological ideas in a given society” (Cone, 1975/1997, p. 38). For the critical liberative theological classroom, Cone and Freire offer

wisdom for critically engaging the relationship between personal and collective histories toward the fulfillment of all humanity.

To this point, Cone participated in critical hermeneutics as he made sense of the history of White supremacy and its influence on the United States as he read life and texts, navigating his present-day context. At the same time, he made sense of the history of Black resistance, survival, and prosperity and its influence on Black life in North America. At once, Cone questioned his personal, communal, and national history as he sought to make sense of and respond to the historic present. Slavery, Bearden, Arkansas, the Black church, the lynching of Black bodies, and Black liberation theology are testaments, witnesses, and memorials to capitalistic practices, political conflicts, and social isolation still present in institutions like the academy and the American society.

History, by way of texts (i.e., images, oral, written), has shaped and continues to shape individuals, communities, and society-at-large. A pedagogy of critical liberative theological consciousness might illustrate present and future possibilities of critical liberative theological education, in academic settings, by continuously insisting on identifying history as a social construct with social consequences, by perpetually honoring the experiences of Black/African Americans, women, LGBTQIA, the poor, and other marginalized groups. To this point, with their texts, Freire and Cone re-constructed history through the lived experiences and lenses of the oppressed. They did so by critically analyzing different ways history, written from the dominant perspective, has affected education and theology. In this manner, the prophetic calling of the critical

liberative theological educator is, in part, to engage history to disrupt hegemonic ideologies about class, gender, race, sex, Christianity, etc.

In “On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberation Education in the 1990s,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1989) wrote,

Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claim to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined *pedagogically*, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically. And this, in turn, requires taking the questions of experience seriously. (p. 185)

By challenging histories of knowledge, Freire has called and encouraged dialogical thinking about what is already known and learned. Education for critical consciousness or critical pedagogy requires focusing on the link between our subjective histories (lived experiences) and the “historical configuration of social forms” (Mohanty, 1989, p. 185).

By being attentive to his context, the context of his students (members of the community), and their relationship to the history of Brazil, Freire transformed a model of education that was oppressive. He invited his students to analyze their locatedness within their society and claim their voice in the educational process. Thus, by “taking the questions of experience seriously,” Freire, in dialogue with his students, theorized a pedagogy of/for the oppressed by bridging the historic present with the historic past so that silenced, invisible victims might speak and transform their sociopolitical realities.

In the spirit of Cone, Freire, and Mohanty, I return to the critical exegetical research guide and historical criticism to offer a theo-pedagogical praxis for a critical liberative theological consciousness/classroom. As I have written, interpretation is a

process which, if critically engaged, invites readers to move beneath and between the layers of a text, their relationship to a text, and their lived experience(s) to develop a robust understanding of a present moment, offering a new or different way of approaching social realities. As a method, historical criticism provides a process for moving between the historic moment of the reader, the history of the reader, the history of a text, and the history of its author. In this way, historical criticism invites the reader to read a text and life, closely.

In reading a text and life, closely, a theo-pedagogical praxis, in a critical liberative theological classroom, should invite students to a process of critical exegesis and critical interpretation or reflexive re-interpretation of social realities. Contrary to conventional wisdom, social and theological realities are not objective certainties that students and teachers either choose to accept as is, and live accordingly, or be forever silenced by the truth of dominant narratives. We, teachers and students, create and re-create our theological and social realities, in community – good, bad, or otherwise. As social and theological realities are not objective certainties, neither are dominant narratives authorities that forever determine the truth of our socially constructed institutions. To assist with peeling back the layers of socially constructed institutions and analyzing the lenses through which the world is read, again, I propose that students be provided with a copy of the critical exegetical research guide. As they learn to exegete texts, themselves, and social realities, the guide gives them an outline to follow.

Abolitionists, suffragists, and civil rights leaders are evidence of the abovementioned truth because it was not the United States Government or white men - in

economic, political, and theological positions of power - that willingly ended systems of oppression. Abolitionists spoke truth to power and fought for the end of the system of slavery. Women challenged the status quo and fought to change an electoral system that denied their right to participate in a system of democracy. Too, civil rights activists and leaders of the mid-20th century, many of whom were ordained ministers, fought for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in order to reform all systems that denied communities/individuals the fullness of their humanity. To be clear, these are not the only examples of historic sociopolitical realities that shaped our historic present, but they are major signposts on the journey of interpretation and re-interpretation in the United States.

Thus, with history in view, I submit that a critical theological educator seeking to join their students in interrogating dominant narratives, imbued with hegemonic ideologies, might design their course around a sequence of guiding questions. With guiding questions, offered at the start of the course and included in the syllabus, the teacher initiates a process of exegesis. At the outset, the history that students enter the classroom with is interrupted in such a way that they might become suspicious or curious about what they know (or what we think they know) about themselves, others, and the texts that have conditioned them. In this way, with guiding questions, the teacher offers a lens through which to read life and texts, differently. In the same way, by shaping the classroom (e.g., curricula) with critical guiding questions, prior to critically reading a specific text, students begin to un/consciously analyze their lived experiences and the

lenses through which they read the world. In so doing, the process of moving beneath the surface of an individual's existence, collective history, and a text is set in motion.

In the vein of Freire, Cone, critical pedagogues, and liberation theologians, I do not assume there is a "one size fits all" approach to critical liberative theological education. Liberation is a process that takes seriously the sociopolitical experiences of students and teachers, in particular academic settings. The guiding questions I suggest are offered as a path for peeling back the layers of individual and collective histories, conditioned by domination, so as to take "the [road] less traveled" (Frost, 1992, p. 163), as we, teachers and students, submit ourselves to a process of converting from an old way to a new way of being-in-the-world. So, too, the guiding questions I suggest are derived from the intersection of Cone and Freire's work, gleaned from my critical exegesis of *God of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, articulated via the imaginative dialogue in Chapter IV. The guiding questions are:

- How does our knowledge of history and lived experience(s) inform our understanding of the relationship between *everyday* life and theology?
- What is the relationship between teachers' lives, students' lives and theological interpretations, conditioned by oppressive realities?
- In what ways does the oppressor-oppressed, teacher-student contradiction shape our theological reflections?
- What is the curricular relationship between problem-posing education, theology, and biblical interpretation?

- What are the implications of a banking model of education in a theological classroom?
- In what ways do my actions, as a teacher, communicate the love I have for humanity, particularly students?
- What is the relationship between Christian faith – and/or faith in humanity – and political praxis?

Prior to engaging the critical exegetical guide, in full, the guiding questions invite a transformation of relational power because they invite the teacher as well as students to name social realities, analyze social realities, and contemplate new/different social realities, in community. My adoption of this educational approach is linked to the wisdom of communion as a way of transforming structures of domination and education as the practice of freedom. My intent is to engage students in a generative use of the critical exegetical research guide with the hope that they might grow in their critical awareness/reflection/consciousness. In short, as a critical theological educator, my intended outcome is to guide students in a process of analyzing religious and non-religious texts and the world as a text. In so doing, the horizon of the teacher becomes involved in the horizon of the students, both engaging un/consciously in the struggle for humanization (i.e., a new horizon) through the process of exegesis.

The use of the critical exegetical research guide in the critical liberative theological classroom, then, is fluid. The principal benefit being that students have a method for critically deconstructing and critically reconstructing a text (e.g., history, lived experience, media, scripture). The guide would allow students to enter the critical

exegetical process by simply inviting them to read with intentionality. Having said that, I recognize that the critical exegetical guide might be overwhelming for initial users. I describe the guide as overwhelming in the sense that a student may not know where to begin, assuming, based on normative reading practices, that they need to begin at the beginning (area I) and end at the end (area VIII). However, students would learn to use the guide by learning from and learning with their teacher.

In full transparency, as a reader and researcher, I have been utilizing some form of an exegetical guide for more than ten years. In 2009, I was introduced to an exegetical guide, by one of my divinity school teachers, and, at the outset, I struggled to comprehend its application to scripture and everyday life. Although I struggled to comprehend its application, my teacher worked with me and fellow classmates to understand its significance as it pertained to reading scripture, my interpretations/lived experiences, theological interpretations within the Christian tradition, and the connections to everyday life. As a doctoral student, committed to the development of a just and democratic society, I know just how beneficial a guide can be to critically read texts and social realities amidst layers of social conditioning. As a teacher, I would work with my students to understand the critical exegetical research guide and its application. Too, in the theological classroom, I would apply the critical exegetical research guide in phases and in a different order. The overarching goal being to center the cultivation of a student's intentionality with a text, encouraging curiosity, awareness, reflection, and response.

By offering the critical exegetical research guide in phases and in a different order, I assume, based on learning and teaching experiences, that students might be more inclined to risk reading intentionally if they know, at the outset (phase 1): 1) How am I to read a text (basic understanding – no right or wrong way to read), 2) What am I reading a text for (comprehending the focus of the text), and 3) Why am I reading a text (relating my understanding of and focus of a text to my tangible reality). With these questions, the teacher is encouraged to be transparent about the how, the why, and the what for of critical reading praxis. Being transparent with students about the how, the why, and the what for of critical reading praxis is paramount in aiding students with connecting the content of the course with the context in which they live (Cannon, 2014; Darder, 2018; Freire, 1970/2003). Pedagogically, students who connect the content of the course (i.e., texts) with the context in which they live are better positioned to address *isms* in the public square (Brock, 2010; Cone, 1975/1997; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008). The transparency of the teacher, paired with the critical exegetical guide, provides students with tools to disrupt systems of oppression, as individuals and a community. How students and teachers learn to ask critical questions of texts, themselves, and others, in the theological classroom, influences the ways they act in society. By using the guide, students begin a process of dispelling the myths that shape their thinking and their actions. Too, students, in dialogue with their teacher and their classmates, begin to confront their preconceived notions of the world, their theological beliefs, and their actions in relation to one another (Cannon, 2014; Cannon & Pinn, 2014; Cone, 1975/1997; Freire, 1970/2003; West, 2006). To this end, phase 1 centers awareness,

phase 2 centers reflection, and phase 3 centers response. As I perceive it, a phased approach invites students to an educative process that allows them to contemplate and reflect on the un/conscious connections between reading a text (e.g., scripture) and everyday experiences (i.e., sociopolitical contexts).

Commencing with phase 1 might orient students in a way that they become eager to learn about the text (or what the text has to offer) and prospective inferences for their lives. With an eagerness to learn about a text, or, at a minimum, an understanding of how, why, and what for in reading a text, students can begin to interview the text. In the interview (exegetical) process, students move beyond the surface of a text to a deeper engagement with a text. As they begin to respond to the question, *how am I to read a text*, they encounter the questions *who was the author of the text* and *why did the author write the text?* So, too, as students begin to respond to the question, *what am I reading a text for*, they encounter the questions, *how does my life influence my reading of the text* and *how did the author's life influence their writing of the text?* As students transition from phase 1 to phase 2 (reflection) and begin to respond to the question, *why am I reading a text*, areas I, V, and VI come into view because students are challenged to understand the historic relevance of the text they are reading, ask questions of the text to discern its meaning, and read beyond the text to other texts (i.e., commentaries) that might illustrate its tangibility. In so doing, as students transition from phase 2 to phase 3 (response), they become aware of the text in ways that invites them to reflect on what they have learned, communicate the complexity of their learning with the text, and offer a response to their learning from the densities of the critical exegetical process.

In the theological classroom, phase 1 might incorporate an assignment that invites students to share their story as they read the story of Jesus birth. Phase 2 might consist of a critical reflection on a particular passage of scripture (e.g., Luke 4:16–22). The outcome of phase 3 might include a poster presentation, a poem, or a community engaged project. Throughout the educative journey, from phase 1 to phase 3, students and teacher would be participating in a complicated process of disentangling theological and social conditioning. Based on the critical exegetical research guide I presented in Chapter I, a phased and differently ordered guide would look like this:

- **Phase 1 (Awareness)**
 - Area II – Approaching the text
 - Area III – Interviewing the text
 - Area IV – Being interviewed by the text
- **Phase 2 (Reflection)**
 - Area I – Selecting the text
 - Area V – Listening to the text
 - Area VI – Exploring what I heard in the text
- **Phase 3 (Response)**
 - Area VII – Conversing with and responding to the text
 - Area VIII – Interpreting the dialogue (with the text)

Now, if the educative process were as simple or proceeded as smoothly as I have written it, then the cause of liberation would not be the struggle that it is. Individuals, communities, and societies are complex, imbued with intersecting oppressions. Thus,

deconstructing oppressive sociopolitical and religio-cultural realities so as to transform these realities toward the fullness of humanity (and all of creation) requires endurance. Therein, the critical exegetical process is a life-long process that is circular or spherical and not linear.

As a student cultivates their capacity to read critically and read for the recognition of power, the more complex the journey between their world and the world of a text becomes. In other words, as students and teachers experience the critical exegetical method, from beginning to end, they return – time after time - to various aspects of the process as they participate in the spherical journey of the hermeneutic circle and express a new/different interpretation of reality; thereby, advancing their critical literacies. In actuality, for the majority of students (not all, but most), one course designed around and/or focused on critical liberative theological praxis cannot undo a lifetime of racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, capitalistic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, etc. thinking and learning. Nevertheless, the cause of liberation calls for a theo-pedagogical praxis via the critical liberative theological classroom that is imbued with hope, love, resistance, purpose, and justice.

My Manifesto of Critical Liberative Theological Consciousness

Being a person of color is a civic project because your relationship to America, sadly, is a fight in order to matter, to survive, and one day thrive. (Love, 2019, p. 8)

Action and Commitment in the Process of Liberation

Throughout this research process, I have learned more and more about myself, my theological interpretation, my pedagogical style, and my philosophy of education. Equally, in a deeply spiritual way, Freire's words, in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, are arresting my consciousness. He wrote, "my own unity and identity, in regard to others and to the world, constitutes my essential and irrepeatable way of experiencing myself as a cultural, historical, and *unfinished* being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my *unfinishedness* [my emphasis]" (1998, p. 51). The unfinishedness that I am experiencing is a gateway, I believe, to new/different possibilities concerning the cause of liberation. My identity as a teacher, a minister, a researcher, and a public intellectual is constantly growing, evolving, maturing, because as I learn more about myself, my familial history, and my communal history in the United States, I cultivate my prophetic calling as an educator and a minister to "set the burdened and battered free" (Luke 4:18 MSG).

As I think about the students, individuals, and communities I will encounter, I cannot stop thinking about the history of Black people in the United States. Black people have been oppressed, dehumanized, subjugated, and silenced through cultural, economic, educational, political, theological, and other means. I cannot stop reflecting on the history of my family - Native, African, and European. I cannot stop reasoning with persons such as, but not limited to: Olivia Garmon Thomas (mother), Melvin Thomas (father), Marinda Coggins Garmon (maternal grandmother), Elizabeth Ballard Thomas (multi-racial paternal grandmother), Junius Thomas (bi-racial paternal grandfather), Oliver Melton Garmon (maternal grandfather), Robert Coggins (1850–1925, ancestor, son of a

slave/slave master), Minerva Ruffin Smallwood (1831–1931, ancestor, slave/free), Trayvon Martin, Mary McLeod Bethune, Thomas Jefferson, Addie Mae Collins, Benjamin E. Mays, Darryl W. Aaron (pastor), Jordan Davis, D’Najah P. Thomas (wife), Bettina L. Love, Atatiana Jefferson, various professors/mentors, and innumerable individuals (unknown to me) whose lives bear witness to and are symbolic of the historic realities of violence, oppression, and the struggle for freedom in the United States.

I know that I live in a society, a country, a world that judge’s people based on their gender, class, ability, sexuality, race, etc. In other words, I know that I live among an unjust people, in an unjust society. I know that the system of colonization is still at work and the United States is wielding imperialistic power, inside and outside of its borders. I know that education, within and without theological academic settings, is still socializing people in ways that acculturates them to the history and values of dominant groups. I know that students, whether they are in high school, college, graduate school, or divinity school, are being formed according to education as a means to economic productivity, a function of market capitalism, which dehumanizes *all*. I know that the school to prison pipeline is a reality that feeds corporate, state, and federal coffers, destroying the lives of children, parents, grandparents, and communities. I know that Christian institutions are participating in the marginalization of people throughout this country and around the world. Because I know these sociopolitical realities to be true, I also know that being Black, a person of color, a member of a marginalized group, and a member of a dominant group is an *unfinished* civic project! So, too, teachers and

students, entering the theological classroom, formed by religio-cultural and socio-political realities, are *unfinished*.

In the concluding chapter of his final text, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, Cone (2018) links the ancient story of Cain and Abel to the present story of White and Black people. In this biblical story, Cain kills his brother Abel, but Abel's blood speaks from the ground.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain said, "I don't know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen: your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (Gen 4:9–10; Cone, 2018, p. 170).

Cone asserts that Abel is a metaphor for Black people and Cain is a metaphor for White people. I extend this metaphor to the oppressed and the oppressors. Abel is a metaphor for Black people in particular and the oppressed universally. Cain is a metaphor for White people in particular and the oppressor universally. In a critical liberative theological way, God is asking oppressors in America and around the world, especially Christians, "Where are your oppressed brothers and sisters?" And oppressors respond, "We don't know. Are we their keepers?" And God says, "What have you done to them?"

As I perceive it, cultivating a critical liberative theological consciousness is about listening to the cries of the oppressed, being accountable to the cries, being responsible for the cries, and bearing witness to the cries whether I am in Greensboro, NC, Washington, DC, Brownsville, TX, or São Paulo, Brazil. In like manner, critical liberative theological education, as I define it, is a theological pedagogy of the oppressed, for the oppressed, via the critical liberative theological classroom. For theological

educators and students, who believe in God and situate their belief within the Christian tradition, the life, death, and blood of countless oppressed people is crying out to God, to oppressors, and to liberationists who endeavor to: (a) let their whole life bear witness to social misery, (b) let suffering speak, (c) let the victims be visible, and (d) let social misery be put on the agenda of those in power (West & Buschendorf, 2014; West & Cone, 2014). Thus, the theo-pedagogical imperative for cultivating a critical liberative theological consciousness/classroom/education is the relief of oppression, toward the fullness of humanity (and all of creation), for the oppressed, first, and the oppressors. Because students and teachers, whether or not we choose to accept our civic responsibilities, are one another's keepers less we continue to die as one another's fools (Cone, 2018; King, 1967).

For all that I know to be true about systems of oppression, I also know that there are people, communities, and movements that are living justly amidst unjust realities. Through all of the suffering that oppressed bodies endure, there is hope, love, and joy. Through acts of resistance and the struggle for freedom, love, hope, and joy are discovered in the community of the #MeToo Movement, uncovered in the multiracial efforts of the Poor People's Movement, and embodied in the Social Justice Art Movement. Based on what I know and have experienced, I endeavor to teach students to cultivate a critical liberative theological consciousness for the betterment of our communities and the transformation of our society. I endeavor to provide methods for analyzing intersecting oppressions within the context of students' everyday lives.

That is, I endeavor to teach students to think critically, to ask critical questions of themselves and others, to examine texts, to deconstruct their belief systems, and to deconstruct/reconstruct their individual/communal consciousness toward the fulfillment of our/their humanity.

For me, teaching is a public act of resistance, doing what I can to subvert oppressive ideologies. Thus, teaching students to think politically, and grasp the connections between what they read in the theological classroom and what they experience outside of the theological classroom, includes a close, critical reading of scripture with an emphasis on the gospel of Jesus Christ. My hope is to support students as they develop a foundation for thoughtful, reflective, participation in the theological classroom and the world. Thereby, as I claim it to be/become, the theo-pedagogical praxis of the critical liberative theological educator is a *living*, multifaceted process of educating students for resistance, struggle, justice, love, and faithful actualization of the fullness of humanity.

Through a critical exegetical process of community building, critical thinking, critical listening, dialogue, and critical reflection, students might be/become thoughtfully engaged members of their communities and our society. In the theological classroom, students are preparing to be leaders as they engage the church and the broader society (ATS, 2003). To that end, the theological classroom is a space where students learn to disentangle theological and social formations that are destructive, construct new/different ways of being in relations, and transform interpretive lenses that *see* and create hierarchies of humanity (and all of creation). Consequently, I believe critical liberatory

theological education has the potential to positively impact individuals and communities, across boundaries, through a lens of critical wisdom that challenges conventional wisdom which maintains notions of domination and subjugation. Inviting students and teachers, alike, to a process of critically examining their knowledge, as they engage history, their lived experiences, the lived experiences of others, and scripture is critical for emancipatory change.

As this research project continues to inform my theological and pedagogical praxis, beyond the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, I hope to apply my discoveries in a theological classroom at a divinity school. The process of pairing two disciplines, reading closely, asking critical questions, reflecting, and responding has helped me peel back layers and identify lenses of my theo-social formation, which I believe will benefit students - as they prepare to be/become leaders in the church and broader society. Teaching, in a theological classroom, would allow for the application of historical criticism and the critical exegetical research guide toward the creation and application of curricula. Too, teaching, in a divinity school, would provide an opportunity to experience, with students, community building and the process of liberation, in a particular academic context, toward the cultivation of agency and the relief of social misery. Further, teaching in a divinity school would broaden and deepen the potentials of this project. By doing so, I would continue exploring: (a) theo-pedagogical praxis as an educator, (b) theo-social transformation as a minister, and (c) the limitations of theology (i.e., God-talk), concerning the humanizing cause of liberation, as a researcher.

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